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WOMEN IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS:
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School
of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Ariel Larson

May 2015

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Ariel Larson

2015

WOMEN IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS:
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

By

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

By

Ariel Larson

August 2015

Dissertation supervised by Russ Walsh, PhD

This research looks at how women in particular navigate the complicated power dynamics of twelve-step programs, specifically AA, to achieve long-term sobriety. This study attempts to understand how women in AA are appropriating and shaping AA and its reliance on the twelve-steps in unique and resourceful ways to make recovery their own. The methodological approach of this study is empirical-phenomenological.

Interviews with five female members of Alcoholics Anonymous were conducted, transcribed and analyzed in an attempt to identify and understand how women approach and adapt recovery strategies and technologies that evolved during the twentieth century to meet the needs of alcoholic men. Discussion of findings is structured as a comparison and dialogue with *Metaphors of Transformation: Feminine and Masculine* (White and

Chaney, 1993), which also looks at the experience and language of women in recovery, applying a meta-analysis of theory, science, practice and experience. White and Chaney's approach is not grounded in a specific phenomenological analysis, but is perhaps the most definitive work to date examining the need for gender specific understanding in AA and recovery. Results of the current study suggest that themes of empowerment, resolution of shame, and connection with other women are particularly important for gender-specific treatment.

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Introduction

The following study will explore women's experiences of Alcoholics Anonymous, and their ways of navigating through its predominantly male-oriented treatment paradigm. Consistent with a growing literature concerned with minority access to treatment services and mechanisms of recovery in a variety of cultural contexts this project will employ a phenomenological method to delineate the unique and common features of women who achieved sobriety through participation in AA.

Prevalence

Epidemiological data suggests substance use disorders and the accompanying difficulties are pervasive, touching the lives of most, if not all, Americans in some form. According to *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, rates of alcohol abuse and dependence are "highly prevalent and disabling" (Hasin, 2007, p. 830). JAMA reported a lifetime prevalence of alcohol abuse at 17.8%, and reported that 4.7% of individuals interviewed said they abused alcohol within twelve months of the survey. Alcohol dependence was reported at a lifetime rate of 12.5% with 3.8% reporting dependence within twelve months of the survey. Dependence rates were higher among men, whites, Native Americans and respondents who were middle-aged, younger, had lower incomes and were single adults. As a group, middle-aged Americans had the highest prevalence of lifetime dependence, which is associated with significant disability and a number of substance and alcohol use disorders. In addition to increased risks for automobile accidents and fetal alcohol effects, alcohol dependent individuals are more likely to have financial and legal difficulties, mood, anxiety and personality disorders,

neuropsychological impairment and problems taking medication as prescribed (Hasin, et al, 2007).

The Origins of Alcoholics Anonymous

Understanding of alcohol addiction as an illness has increased since the 1930's, when the successful lobbying efforts of Alcoholics Anonymous made the disease model relatively common, whereas before it was almost universally considered a moral failing (Conrad and Schneider, 1992). The first notable proponent of the *alcoholism as disease* argument was Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician, signer of the Declaration of Independence and influential American colonist. But Rush was before his time. During the late 18th and the 19th centuries, temperance efforts and reform clubs came and went as "inebriates" (White, 1998) were housed in any institution that would take them, from charitable homes and jails to workhouses or even lunatic asylums. These alcoholics, almost exclusively male, were not treated for their alcoholism until professional treatment began to emerge in the late 1800's. Early efforts were highly ineffective and alcoholics were usually considered hopeless cases until mutual aid groups began to take hold. It wasn't until 1935 and the birth of AA, that alcoholics began to band together to find hope and fellowship (White, 1998) and to garner the attention and support that would carry their organization forward until it became the internationally represented, household name that it is today. Ultimately AA, with its emphasis on a modified disease or allergy model and addiction as a chronic, irreversible condition, would change the national and even international understanding of the chronic drunk, urging us toward the medicalization of a formerly moral condition.

After 75 years of growth, membership estimated at well over two million, meetings on every continent, four editions of the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* available in 58 languages, and vigorous outreach programs aimed at physicians and other healthcare professionals (aa.org), AA has helped to destigmatize alcoholism. For a number of reasons— ranging from social and economic forces colliding at the right time and place (aided by AA founder Bill Wilson’s vision and charisma) to the effectiveness of AA’s program for many alcoholics who previously had little hope—AA spread far and wide, followed by Al-anon/Al-Ateen for families of alcoholics, and Narcotics Anonymous. Later there was a veritable explosion of twelve-step groups styled after AA, including Sex Addicts Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous and many more. But just because twelve-step recovery dominates the field doesn’t mean it is a good fit for everyone.

Women in Alcoholics Anonymous

Women have had a presence in AA from the very beginning and as far back as 1945 AA literature acknowledged “attitudinal barriers” that women faced in the AA recovery community (White, 1998, p. 158). While the wives of the founders, Lois Wilson and Anne Smith as well as others, deserve credit for their support of the early AA community, the women trying to get sober during that time deserve credit for fighting addiction along with the sexist stereotypes of the fifties and sixties. Some men didn’t believe women could be alcoholics and others didn’t believe women belonged in AA since they would be a “distraction,” but they struggled on and their stories are told alongside those of pioneering male AA’s. Florence R.’s story appeared in the first edition

of the Big Book, though she eventually died of alcoholism, and Marty Mann was not only one of the pioneering women of AA, but achieved lasting sobriety and her story, “Women Suffer Too,” is still being reprinted in current editions of the Big Book (White, 1998, p. 158). Some of AA’s most cherished traditions, including free coffee and birthday tokens or chips given out for sober time, are credited to Sister Mary Ignatia, whose remarkable efforts on behalf of alcoholics at St. Thomas hospital in Akron laid the groundwork for a pathway to recovery that is still recognizable today (White, 1998, p. 166).

Many of the stereotypes highlighted by those early AA articles regarding women in AA and their ability (or lack thereof) to work alongside men to obtain lasting sobriety are still present today. The extent to which oppressive patriarchal forces have been tempered by feminist movements and liberation efforts continues to be debated, but the fact remains that some minority groups and some women have felt that AA does not effectively address their needs. Jean Kirkpatrick, a sociologist, formed one of the best-known alternatives to Alcoholics Anonymous after finding herself in a thirteen-year relapse following 3 years of sobriety in AA. Kirkpatrick emphasized that AA was not to blame, but also expressed her belief that women progress through addiction and recovery in a way that is fundamentally different from men (White, 1998, p. 279). Kirkpatrick’s story is important since the popularity of the mutual aid society she founded, Women for Sobriety (WFS), suggests that she struck a chord among women who also felt that they either required something else, or at least could benefit from something they were not getting at AA meetings. Also, Jean Kirkpatrick and WFS provide an important segue,

since the current study is not an attempt to discredit AA, but an effort to understand how women in AA are appropriating the twelve-steps in unique and resourceful ways to make recovery their own.

For Whom Does AA Work?

Before embarking on a critique of the effectiveness of AA, it should be mentioned that AA was not intended to be a treatment but evolved as a form of self-care and mutual aid. Some of the criticisms leveled at AA may appear less relevant when considered in light of the fact that AA is meant to be used in conjunction with treatment. Still, relapse and dropout during the first year of twelve-step recovery is a significant problem, and the best predictor of success seems to be facilitating a transition, during inpatient treatment, of the recovering person into a twelve-step community or other support group outside (Kelly and Moos, 2003). Twelve-step literature and mainstream approaches to research and treatment tend to explain attrition by means of self-reinforcing and/or generally inconclusive arguments. It is often observed that alcoholics who come to AA but do not stay sober have failed to adopt the principles and rituals which are the foundation of AA recovery. The basic text of Alcoholics Anonymous describes those who achieve lasting sobriety as “spiritually fit,” (2001, p. 100) which allows them to abstain from alcohol and be productive members of society. Medical and psychological literature has failed to provide a consistent explanation for addiction, emphasizing social and environmental factors and physiological mechanisms of abuse, but not offering a conclusive explanation of addiction or theory for treatment. Moreover, there is a tendency to ignore the intricate and constitutive relationship between addicts, AA and treatment, as well as the resulting

narratives of addiction and recovery that can become woven into social discourse until they are accepted as fact. For example, there is phrase found in the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text (2008) which is often repeated around twelve-step circles: “We are people in the grip of a continuing and progressive illness whose ends are always the same: jails, institutions and death” (p. 3). While this phrase certainly contains an element of powerful truth, it may also function to shape an individual’s relationship with substances, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. The twelve-step emphasis on spirituality and surrender as the sole means by which this terrible fate might be avoided takes on epic proportions when fueled by the emotionally charged, seemingly miraculous stories of grateful, recovering alcoholics. It can be argued that treatment options and understandings of addiction are produced by the treatment industry and twelve-step influence rather than being born entirely of an experience innate to the addict (Klingemann, 2011). Treatment and AA might then be conceptualized as an initiation process rather than a natural evolution or ideal trajectory. This, in turn, might contribute to the alienation of some who have been through treatment and experienced a rift, or sense of profound alienation following their discharge.

Independent of the subjective experience of addicts who undergo treatment, studies show that more than half of addicts who complete treatment are using two years later (White 1993, p. 4). Whatever the reasons, AA does not work for everyone and other pathways to recovery have evolved. Support groups exist for medication assisted recovery as well as S.O.S. (Secular Organizations for Sobriety, also known as *Save Ourselves*), and some people find ways to abstain from substances on their own, i.e.,

natural recovery. Reasons for pursuing options other than twelve-step programs are as widely varied as the addicts who pursue those options. Some reasons might include an aversion to the spirituality implicit in twelve-step recovery, identification with a minority group that is not widely represented in meetings, inaccessibility of meetings or failure to connect emotionally with the Fellowship of AA or other twelve-step organizations, or simply an inability or unwillingness to quit using.

How Does AA Work When It Works?

Although it can be argued that the AA model sets up complicated power dynamics that are difficult for some people to navigate, many find success and achieve lasting sobriety by joining AA or a different twelve-step program. AA literature emphasizes the adoption of spiritual principles and regular prayer and meditation resulting in “a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition” (2001, p. 85). But outside of AA there is no consensus about what mechanisms are actually at work when an alcoholic finds they are suddenly able to abstain from alcohol when they never could before, or when they—hopefully—manage to sustain that abstinence. Kelly, Magill and Stout (2009) provide a compelling argument, following their meta-analysis of thirteen studies, that contrary to what you will hear from many committed AA members, spirituality is not shown to be that directly effective, nor are the specific rituals and practices of the program. Instead, the common process mechanisms they identified were enhancing *self-efficacy*, *coping skills*, and *motivation* and the *facilitation of adaptive social network changes*. These findings can be seen as complementing the frequently promoted belief that one of AA’s main functions is to

promote the formation of a new, or non-drinking identity, largely through the act of storytelling (Cain, 1991; Jodlowski, et al, 2007; Swora, 2001; Humphreys, 2000; Strobbe & Kurtz, 2012). The continuity provided through attending meetings where members tell the story of their addiction and recovery according to classical literary conventions—what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now, or beginning, middle, end—may provide the newly recovering alcoholic with what Strobbe and Kurtz refer to as a *subjective, evaluative function over time*. In other words, the addict becomes aware of herself in time and in a social context, contributing to an experience of belonging and self-efficacy.

Limitations of Alcoholics Anonymous

Because of its emphasis on surrender of self-will and sponsorship, it is arguable that the twelve-step model might be particularly problematic for certain populations. It is also important to note AA is only one of many fellowships and mutual aid groups that offer guidance and support for recovery, and it is distinguished by its emphasis on the twelve steps. People from non-Western cultures, women and minorities, and especially those who have experienced subjugation and abuse of power, may be more likely to struggle with the idea that surrender and forgiveness are required for following the steps. AA newcomers are encouraged to seek out sponsors who have more sobriety or clean time than they do, and begin working the steps. This is an unregulated system, which is part of its genius, but it also leaves room for abuse of power and newcomers to sobriety can be very, very vulnerable. As Ning (2005), Tangenberg (2001) and Vigilant (2008) articulate so well, each addict is dealing with not one, but multiple narratives, multiple

identities, along with the stigma of addiction and recovery and, in some cases, the physical wreckage that addiction has wrought in the form of disease and poverty. Such individuals are likely to need more than a one-size-fits-all approach to support them in confronting their many challenges.

While an AA approach emphasizing surrender and felt deference to the authority of a sponsor may work for many it also runs the risk of allowing covert racism, sexism, prejudice, hostility and overt abuse of power, such as that manifested in *thirteenth-stepping* (where newcomers to twelve-step programs are preyed upon sexually by more experienced members). AA philosophy encourages taking responsibility and discourages identifying as a victim of one's alcoholism, which can be confusing when people have been abused, especially in early recovery.

The AA Model for Women

Awareness of the existence of problematic substance abuse and alcoholism among women has increased since the 1970's. There is an argument to be made that substance abuse by women didn't become a significant issue until women entered the workforce in great numbers and their lack of productivity became noteworthy. This chain of events resulted in the "Adam's Rib" (White, 1993, p. 3) phenomenon in treatment approaches where women were expected to respond efficiently to the strategies designed for male addicts. The typical alcoholic of the twentieth century was a middle-class, white man and treatment modalities evolved to treat that typical alcoholic.

More recently literature began to emerge that implies a certain resourcefulness and adaptability on the part of female addicts and alcoholics and explicitly addresses the

ways that women take up and adapt twelve-step tools and strategies to fit their specific needs, as distinct and different from those of men. The recovery model outlined by Mohatt et al (2008) is one example of a study that emphasizes the importance of cultural context when dealing with addiction. Grant, (2007) Prussing, (2007) and Yeh (2008) also offer studies that examine recovery in unexpected contexts; Women in the rural Mountains of Appalachia, Native Women on North American Reservations and AA groups in Taiwan, respectively, each adopting a unique perspective and each finding different ways that people adapt and mold recovery processes that meet their individual challenges and needs. Given the diversity represented in recovery literature and the remarkable resourcefulness of each individual who crafts and sustains a successful program of abstinence, the interest in women's particular challenges and needs is definitely justified. After all, women now comprise one third of AA membership (Kelly and Hoeppner, 2012). But considering the double-standard regarding substance abuse among women and the "veil of secrecy around women's use of alcohol, opiates, chloral hydrate, chloroform, and other psychoactive substances," it is fair to wonder if women are still "over-represented among the consumers" and still hiding their use (White, 1998, p. 42). By itself, secrecy regarding use among women represents a unique challenge and the manifestation of several cultural assumptions, along with at least one double standard—and secrecy is only one factor. Even were a woman confident, comfortable in her body and never having suffered abuse, one might wonder about the assumption that AA's toolbox, designed by and for men, will have everything she needs.

It should be noted that the growing concern over the harmful effects of maternal drug and alcohol abuse on fetal development during the latter part of the twentieth century did lead to a dramatic increase in funding for gender-specific treatment. Particular attention was paid to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and the less severe fetal alcohol effect (FAE) before this gave way to media hysteria over “crack babies” of the 1980’s (White, 1998, p. 299). In the 1980’s and 1990’s women’s treatment centers tripled and these centers did seek to address some of the factors and obstacles to treatment that had previously been neglected. These factors included but were not limited to providing childcare, parent education and family resources and addressing physical safety and domestic violence issues as well as simple things like transportation (White, 1998, p. 299). These movements also set the stage for later researchers who were ready to delve more deeply into gender-specific mechanisms of recovery.

Before Kelly and Hoepfner concluded that women benefit slightly less from AA and benefit in different ways (2012), Baker (2000) studied the efficacy of gender-sensitive treatment programs and commented extensively on the ways that women who might be expected to reject institutionalization (as many women have in the past) responded favorably to a gender-sensitive program that encouraged them to directly address emotional well-being and prioritize issues of safety, parenting and trauma. Only a year later (2001), Paris and Bradley emphasized how often in research, and specifically addiction and recovery research, differences are de-emphasized in favor of aggregate data and generalized conclusions. Consistent with this argument, White and Chaney (1993) highlight a number of areas where they believe women adapt existing recovery structures

in resourceful and intuitive ways, to address their own needs. Because White and Chaney are sympathetic toward AA yet also acknowledge that women in AA have often had to forge their recovery using the language of men, they provide a model and an opportunity to continue a dialogue, and there is a sense in which the current study might be seen as a response to *Metaphors of Transformation* (1993). *Metaphors of Transformation* is a compilation of experiential constructs thoughtfully derived from a global analysis of AA literature, semantics, socialization and ritual. While the resulting themes or metaphors proposed by White and Chaney serve to highlight dissatisfaction and needs of women in recovery, the current study is a natural bridge from the work of White and Chaney which can ground and apply their observations in concrete experience.

Given the cultural double standard regarding women and self-control, it seems wise to approach the female addict thoughtfully. She was never *permitted* her drunken carousing the way her male counterpart was, even when substances were marketed specifically, even ingeniously to her. Take the edible, wine-filled grape-like skins, marketed to sophisticated ladies, so that they might surreptitiously enjoy wine at the opera (White and Kilbourne, 2006) without drawing attention to their consumption. The conflicting messages which permeated culture in the fifties regarding feminine beauty, desire/desirability and self-control are as pervasive and insidious as ever. Women are better at hiding their addiction because they have to be, because the stakes are higher: they are dealing with the triple stigmatization of female addicts who are often automatically assumed to be bad mothers and to be sexually promiscuous (White and Kilbourne, 2006).

Many of the women who seek out AA meetings for help with addiction are immediately aware, upon entering the room, that they are outnumbered. If they stick around long enough to read the literature, they will become cognizant of the fact that they have joined a converted boys club. Some may change overtly sexist language when they read out of the AA texts, some may not think about it much—as discussed at several prior points, each individual has her own experience. For example, many female AA members seem unperturbed by language referring to a male higher power, or chapters in the basic text of AA directly addressing “wives” and employers of the alcoholic with the assumption that the alcoholic is a man. But one thing has been shown repeatedly through a number of studies, that being the importance of storytelling, finding a voice and an identity in the AA fellowship. This has profound implications when we consider the words of an AA member in Cain’s 1991 study who commented on the importance of “learning to be an alcoholic in AA.” This suggests that there is a sense in which women must give up their own language and take up the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, a traditionally male, hierarchical, language that emphasizes surrender, humility and classical storytelling. Even the ubiquitous use of the arguably gendered word *fellowship* might give one pause in the context of a truly gender-sensitive exploration of recovery.

My longstanding interest in addiction and recovery was kindled by participation as a research assistant in a qualitative study of recovery from addiction (Flaherty et al, 2014). This study, during which I had the opportunity to work with Michael Flaherty, Ernie Kurtz and Bill White, allowed me to read the current literature in the field of addiction and recovery. I was particularly inspired by Bill White’s work in the area of gender

specific treatment and minority utilization of treatment and recovery resources. The current project evolved partially as a response to White and Chaney's *Metaphors of Transformation* (1993), and the narrative provided by our sole female interviewee (five out of six were male). As I honed in on a research question and then began to make sense of data from data from this prior study (2014), I also found that themes emphasizing the impact of gendered language on experience were resonant with my own experience as a woman in academia, where hierarchy and linearity are prominent.

Method

Given the particular challenges women have faced and continue to face, both in recovery circles and elsewhere, I proposed a study which looks at how women in particular navigate the complicated power dynamics of twelve-step programs and the implicit sexism and gendering of language and experience which does not (historically) question or address male privilege. This study was intended to look at appropriation of recovery by women who achieve long term sobriety, and adaptations of the program that allow some women to remain in the program, or to remain sober during periods of abstinence from meetings when others with similar histories leave the program and resume drinking.

Participants

The data collection process for the current study included recruitment of participants and conducting of interviews. During the initial phase I made contact with local AA members by attending meetings, telling members I met about my study, providing them with fliers (see Appendix B) and exchanging contact information. Three participants

learned about the study through word of mouth (one participant who heard about the study through a colleague then referred a friend; the final participant was referred by an earlier participant). I then called interested individuals in order to follow up and find out if they wanted to move forward with scheduling an interview. All parties who expressed interest chose to move forward, and we scheduled a two-hour block of time during which I would conduct an interview.

Five women were interviewed for the current project. Participants were recruited through word of mouth, researcher attendance of AA meetings, and distribution of fliers. Participants were offered reimbursement for travel costs up to ten dollars. None requested reimbursement.

An attempt for diversity of sample was made. Four out of five participants were white, and one identified as being of Colombian descent. While this may appear to be somewhat homogenous, it is representative of the region where the study was done. Demographic information was not collected, but all five participants indicated that they identify as heterosexual. All five participants signed a release stating that they met the requirements of the study including at least three years of continuous sobriety (including abstinence from drugs and alcohol and also regular AA meeting attendance and involvement in the AA program), and the absence of co-occurring mental health disorders.

I am profoundly grateful to all five participants who so graciously shared their stories with me. I was moved by each narrative in different ways, and also felt resonances between narratives that would be likely to strike chords with most women. It has been a

struggle throughout the process of analysis, to decide how to share the beauty, strength and resourcefulness present in these stories and these lives without endangering each participant's right to privacy.

Participant one reported nearly forty years of continuous sobriety and AA involvement. It should be noted that length of sobriety is not necessarily synonymous with quality of sobriety, but the breadth of experience and perspective gained during many years of AA involvement is very relevant to the current study. Participant one contacted me after hearing about my study through a mutual acquaintance and expressed interest in participating. Her experience in AA during the 1970's and 1980's provided valuable perspective on how things have changed in the fellowship and what it was like for a woman to be part of the fellowship when there were far fewer women involved.

Participant two reported more than twenty-five years of continuous sobriety. She was referred by participant one. Her lengthy career as a nurse was central to her story, and provided a unique perspective. She also provided perspective on regional differences in AA norms and traditions.

Participant three was newest to recovery out of the five, and said she recently celebrated her four-year anniversary. Her experience as a minority and an adoptee was a focus in her narrative, and provided valuable depth and insight. She was honest and generous in sharing her story, as were all five participants. She was recruited to the study by the researcher at an AA meeting.

Participant four reported more than twenty-five years of continuous sobriety. She shared her story with colorful detail, candor and a lot of humor. Her perspective on AA in

different states in the US was valuable. She was recruited by the researcher at an AA meeting.

Participant five reported more than thirty-five years of continuous sobriety. Her story included many elements that highlighted the intergenerational aspects of alcoholism, and the challenges of addiction and recovery for women and mothers, specifically. She was referred to the study by participant four.

Procedures

All participants were asked if they would like to meet at their home or would prefer that I schedule a different location. Three participants requested that the interview be conducted at my home and I obliged. Two participants invited me to interview them in their homes.

Participants signed consent forms (see Appendix A) allowing for audio-recording of the interview, and were offered a copy of the consent form. I started each interview by reading the following paragraph:

Please talk about your experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience of working the twelve steps with your sponsor. Feel free to share anything that comes to mind that you think will help me understand what it has been like for you to get sober as a woman in AA.

Follow up questions were primarily limited to requests for clarification and my efforts to better understand the experiences shared by the participant.

Method of Analysis

The methodological approach of this study is empirical-phenomenological. Adapting procedures outlined by Giorgi (1985), Wertz (1984), and Walsh (1995), I carried out the following steps of qualitative analysis:

1. Each recorded interview was transcribed and all identifying information was removed.
2. Each interview was first read in its entirety so as to generate a sense of the whole.
3. After the initial read-through, I began breaking each narrative up into meaning units (Giorgi, 1985). Meaning units were distinguished by a forward slash at the cleavage between identified units. This process was undertaken with the understanding that increasing familiarity with the data and with subsequent readings of transcripts would lead to fine-tuning of meaning units. Highlighting was used to demarcate meaning units as greater clarity was achieved.
4. Meaning units were translated into psychologically resonant themes, which were listed and compiled to form five unique structures of recovery (one for each participant).
5. Each of the five structures and the themes and meanings therein were compared and analyzed for tensions and similarities in order to arrive at common and important themes.

The final list of themes thus reflects not a general or universal structure of recovery, but identifies aspects of recovery that are relevant or resonant to most women in recovery, or are particularly relevant to many women in recovery.

After reading each transcript in its entirety, I began breaking the interviews down into meaning units, inserting a forward slash between each identified meaning unit. After completing this process with each transcript, I went through and made notes corresponding with meaning units, in a preliminary effort to refine the meanings that were present, using the same word or phrase for repetitions of the same or similar meanings in order to arrive at relevant themes. After completing this process, I listed each identified theme. Through a process of reflection and analysis, I refined and distinguished themes, combining those that appeared redundant on further reflection and further articulating those that were too general (e.g., “keeping up a façade” got folded into “isolation” over the course of analysis, whereas “trust” emerged as distinct from “surrender” as analysis progressed).

After completing the process of identifying meaning units, refining meaning units into themes and examining identified themes for redundancy and relevance, and compiling themes from all five interviews, twenty-nine themes were identified. As understanding of the issues and familiarity with the transcripts grew, I refined the initial list of twenty-nine themes down to thirteen. Toward the end of the process, identified themes of keeping up a facade, and maintenance were removed. With careful analysis of the data, it became evident that while keeping up a façade, and feelings of being a fraud were mentioned in four out of five interviews, these references were better understood as a description of isolation than as a distinct theme. Maintenance was discarded because it turned out to be too broad. It connotes a stage of recovery that was referenced by all five participants, but was not supported as a distinct theme, since it is implied that any long-

term member of AA who attends meetings regularly, works the steps and remains sober is engaged in maintenance of her sobriety. Other discarded themes were also understood as being descriptive of, and/or part of larger themes.

Results

The following themes (Table 1) were identified through a process of qualitative analysis (see *Method of Analysis*, above). The goal of this study was not to provide a general structure of recovery, but to identify qualities, behaviors and characteristics that contribute to achieving long-term sobriety. Toward this end, prominent themes were included even if they were not present in all five narratives. However, in the interest of rigor, only themes that were present in at least four narratives are included here.

Table 1. Themes Identified in Current Study
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. Emphasis on the maternal in personal history and interpretation of AA program</i> <i>2. Assimilation of 12 steps in life leading to prioritization of meaningful work and big picture focus</i> <i>3. Connection of AA versus Isolation in addiction</i> <i>4. Intimacy between women, and replacing of adversarial relationships with friendship and mentorship</i> <i>5. Growth in relationship and the emergence of reciprocity and interdependence</i> <i>6. Education, growth and improving oneself as a priority and life orientation</i> <i>7. Distinction between theoretical versus experiential and valuing of the practical and pragmatic</i> <i>8. Sponsorship</i> <i>9. Emphasis on accountability and honesty</i> <i>10. Acceptance, surrender and willingness to let go of control</i> <i>11. Trust</i> <i>12. Valuing of autonomy, manifesting in rejection of hierarchy and prioritization of independence</i> <i>13. Shared experience</i>

It came as a surprise to me that the analysis section of this project felt like the most challenging. After years of exposure to AA culture at a personal and professional level, interacting with friends and clients who were either dealing effectively with substance abuse problems, or who warranted referral to mutual aid support groups like AA, I felt quite familiar with AA principles and culture. I heard very little that surprised me in the moment, as an interviewer/researcher. I followed my dissertation proposal

diligently, rereading each transcribed interview to gain a sense of the larger structure. I did my best to set aside assumptions, biases and personal reactions. I had to work especially hard to disregard the seemingly automatic structures, or narratives that I had built while conducting interviews and making associations with things I already felt that I knew about AA and recovery culture. It was particularly difficult to suspend my inclination to look for the distinctly feminine experiences and themes that I expected to find, and simply attend to the language and content of the each interview.

When considering the above list of themes, several additional ideas should be noted since they were present in all five narratives, but make better sense as categories or areas of experience that were shared. First, relationships with men were prominent in all five interviews. Each participant emphasized corrective male relationships that stood out as part of her narrative and self-understanding. Four out of five participants spoke extensively about abusive romantic partners and one participant spoke about the effect that her abusive father had on her development. Because of the nature of this project, exploring women's experience, and my decision to make that goal explicit in the interview process, it is difficult to determine whether or to what extent participants focused on gender dynamics more than they might have without prompting. For this reason, gender was left out as a theme, in favor of a more rigorous, nuanced understanding of feminine experience in an active rather than reactive sense (for example, intimacy between women and disrupted relationship with mother were included as themes, whereas prioritization of relationships with men was dismissed as too broad).

Additionally, the presence of a violent, controlling background seemed significant as a characteristic. Each participant responded differently to the open-ended interview style. Two participants heard the prompt and seemed to interpret the invitation to talk about their recovery as meaning that they should focus on their time in sobriety and in AA, and not talk about their experience in active addiction. Two participants shared some details about their drinking and using as a background for their recovery narrative, and one participant said virtually nothing about her drinking and using experience but told the story of her life since getting sober and attending AA meetings. Given this context, it seems relevant that all five participants either described in detail or referred in passing but powerful language to controlling backgrounds, either in the nuclear family, or romantic relationships in adulthood. Participant two explicitly related her experience with substances to a sense of relief from trauma she suffered in an abusive relationship, and participant three described a romantic partner who was so abusive that her life was in danger, and alcohol provided her the courage she needed to “talk back,” and eventually to leave. Participant five emphasized her “narcissistic” mother and alcoholic father, and a lack of protective parenting that resulted in her being abused by neighborhood boys. Because of the open interview style, and the varied emphasis on the past as a factor in their relationship with substances and substance abuse, few conclusions can be drawn regarding the significance of abuse history in female addicts and alcoholics. Still, it is important to consider, especially in light of other literature that is bringing to light the significance of treating trauma early in recovering women (see discussion section).

The final thirteen themes will be described and discussed here, along with excerpts and quotes that support the findings.

Themes

1. Emphasis on the maternal in personal history and interpretation of AA program.

All five participants talked about parenting issues, difficulty with mother or mothering, and disrupted maternal relationships in one form or another. Participant one spoke at length about how her program of recovery is applied in her role as the mother of an alcoholic. Referring to her daughter, she said,

“The hospital has pages and pages on her. And it’s sad, and it’s tragic. It’s—I’m powerless. I’m powerless over that girl. I can only love her as a mother and do things that are motherly things. I cannot help her as a suffering alcoholic because she doesn’t want what I have. I hope someday she will.” (Line 642)

Participant five also talked about difficulties as an alcoholic mother, and her efforts to let go of trying to control outcomes in her son’s lives, and participant two shared similar ideas. Participant four told the story of having a child in early sobriety and putting that child up for adoption. She also spoke movingly about her sense that as a sponsor, much of what she does is parent young women who have no idea how to live and have no sense of self-worth or agency.

Participant three emphasized relationship throughout her narrative, and said that one of the most prominent relationships in her life has been with her adoptive mother, with whom she used to feel she had nothing in common, but who has become near and dear since she got sober. Comments about her biological mother and how that broken relationship was part of her drinking were compelling, and included the following:

“I remember feeling that whenever I would drink I would feel really close to my birth mom for some reason. It was really weird, like, I never really—I’ve never really had a conversation with her, obviously I’ve met her, but I’ve never really met her as an adult or anything. But I remember just feeling like, I don’t know, when I drank I felt like...this is what’s up, this is where I’m meant to be.”
(Line 147)

As illustrated by the two quotes above, motherhood and the experience of being a daughter weave together many themes of addiction and recovery for all five women.

Participant five shared a pivotal time in her recovery when she was able to connect with other mothers in AA and have informal meetings in the park, removing obstacles of child care and allowing these busy women to access the fellowship and the program.

2. Assimilation of 12 steps in life leading to prioritization of meaningful work and big picture focus

One particularly interesting theme that emerged strongly in four out of five interviews, and was present in the remaining one, was the idea that in some sense, AA and recovery are not just about alcohol. Perhaps participant four put it most succinctly when she said, “Don’t apply the steps to your life, apply your life to the steps.” (Line 509) Other participants corroborated this sentiment when they shared about ways that the program of AA’s twelve steps had infiltrated how they see the world, how they choose jobs, parent their children, engage in romantic relationships, and make employment decisions. Participant one described several different jobs she has held in recovery, and her sense that recovery provided her with an orientation that allowed her to have success on unexpected levels. She began by saying, “And my big thing is, I never want to, I never want to make money out of my disease,” but acknowledged that her experience in the

program was central to her employment choices and successful career working in the field of recovery in various administrative roles.

“And I said, well I don’t want to make money off my disease and they said well, you’re not. You’re doing the paperwork...And so when they started to go downhill they dismissed me first, one because I was a higher paid employee, and two, because I trained all my staff to take over for me. Because to me, that’s the responsible thing to do. And so um, they really didn’t miss my presence that much. And then I applied for jobs at the hospital...And this guy called me and said, we need your help with the laws, we’ve got to have manuals in two weeks. So I went through and I did all their manuals...And um, uh, so I wasn’t really making money off my disease, it was off my skills.” (Line 362)

Ultimately, participant one summed it up by saying, “I’ve assimilated AA into my personality.” (Line 607)

Regarding the question of how AA becomes a part of ones daily experience and orientation toward life and career, participant five also spoke to the issue of what it means to have a great life. Regarding her career, she said, “It was a job I would have done for free. But my definition of a great life is, you find your passion and then find a way to get paid for it. And so, my school counseling career, here I am a former child abuser, working with kids.” (Line 440)

3. Connection of AA versus isolation in addiction

All five participants shared narratives that emphasized connection as a central aspect of recovery. The four participants who shared about their lives before recovery juxtaposed experiences of profound isolation in addiction, with a gradually dawning sense of being connected and being a part of something in AA. Three participants shared stories that conveyed a sense of connection as something new, and radical, previously unimagined and mysterious. Participant three in particular, emphasized a growing

consciousness of love in her life, which is as significant as the absence of alcohol.

Regarding her former ideas of love, she said,

“And I feel like, I had a lot of struggles too with the whole love thing, which is also another emotion. So, you know, I just, like I just, it sort of just clicked to me the other day listening to someone’s story that, when I was out, you know—I slept with a lot of married men, and was totally ok with it. I mean, I’d have some times where I’d be like, oh this is—I’m a horrible person. But then I’d be like, well, it takes two to tango. And I’m not the one who’s—you know. And I think that for me doing that was sort of like, nobody really loves anybody. Because if this person can just sleep with me, and they’re supposed to like be with their wife and love their family, and they’re willing to put all of that on the line just to be with me, then like, nobody—yeah, nobodies’ really in love with anybody.” (Line 316)

Although participant three spoke passionately about her newfound sense of love and connection in the program of AA (see intimacy theme, below) after four years sober, she still struggles with a habitual tendency to isolate and avoid contact, especially when things get difficult and life problems arise. She sees these tendencies as part of her alcoholism at a characterological level, and the treatment of her isolation as a crucial aspect of treating her addiction.

“Sometimes that’s scary, like I think sometimes with my alcoholism I still have those moments where it’s too much, like I just want to run away and not have anybody know me and not be like, present I guess. But it’s recognizing women like K- and other people that still show up in light of like, major shit going on in their life that show me that, yeah, you can’t just like, run away from it, even if you feel like running away, you know?” (Line 725)

All four of the other interviewees emphasized the importance of friendship, sponsorship and accountability as invaluable both in helping them adopt a lifestyle of abstinence from substances, and also in maintaining that lifestyle and growing as people. Participant four said, “The only people I had were the people in AA.” (Line 127) While participant two was married and still had family in her life when she got sober, she still

asserted the importance of AA in remedying her isolation, saying, “I didn’t have a good record of forming a true partnership with another human being.” (Line 390) One of participant five’s closing statements was the following:

“Well, right now the best friends I have in the world are in alcoholics anonymous. And they are the last things I was looking for. I came in here, I didn’t know you would find real fellowship of the heart. I wouldn’t ever have dreamed that the people that know me best and love me best are in these rooms.” (Line 560)

4. Intimacy between women, and replacing of adversarial relationships with friendship and mentorship

It is difficult to tease apart themes of connection from those of shared intimacy with other women, since all five participants spoke at length about the importance of their relationships with women in the program. There is something important though, about the emphasis on non-romantic relationships with other women, particularly in the context of disrupted relationships with men. Participant two put it simply when she said, “the most valuable part of my program is friendships with women.” (Line 735) Participant three compared her current relationships with women to her past relationships, saying, “They’re not related to anything bad. It’s like, something that’s, like one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. They’re not like a friend of my boyfriend’s, or a friend of my family. They’re not just like, some person that I met randomly. These are people that are on the same wavelength that I am.” (Line 500)

One element that stood out as characteristic of these relationships with women was a sense of mutual caring or mentorship, even in relationships that were not explicitly sponsorship relationships. Participant three said, “It’s just it’s amazing to um, just have

those experiences with the ladies that are in my life now, that teach me stuff. Like I never thought that I could be taught things by women.” (Line 611) Participant four strongly echoed this sentiment when she said,

“The inappropriate sexuality that I exhibited, I needed to be around women. I needed to learn that women are not a problem, women are not the enemy, women are not fucking all bitches. I hated women, I didn’t want to be around women because I couldn’t manipulate them. Because I couldn’t con them.” (Line 314)

She went on to say simply, connecting with women was “incredibly important.” (Line 321) This was not a revelation that came easily to her, as evidenced by the following statement,

“I was encouraged, when I got sober, to attend the women’s meeting because I had sexuality issues. I didn’t want to reach out to women, and it gave me an opportunity to reach past that—oh my god—homophobic—it was a level of homophobia as well. You know um, and I went, wow, these ladies are nice, and they walked me through this pregnancy that I had, and childbirth, and I got to realize that wow, women aren’t bad. Women were out for three things, your money, your dope or your old man. And um, wow, these [women] are ok.” (Line 292)

Participant five emphasized motherhood as a significant part of her life, and talked about being one of the only women in AA in her area for many years, and while she was adamant that the men in the program were accepting and non-judgmental she acknowledged the importance of connecting with other women, saying, “More and more women were coming in, and I was feeling more and more a part of.” (Line 417)

5. Growth in relationship and the emergence of reciprocity and interdependence

Another theme that was difficult to separate from connection and/or intimacy with women was the idea of growth in relationship, that relationships are not simply a means to an end, but an intricate and subtle end in themselves. In relationship, all five

participants found that they learned about reciprocity, generosity, and joy in friendship that took on a momentum of its own, and was not motivated by acquisitiveness, competition or a need for stability or caretaking. Participant three talked about the way that her learning in relationship with friends in the program has changed how she relates to other people in her life:

“These relationships with women have been so instrumental in, in even my relationship with my husband today. I am the woman that I am today because of women in recovery. You know, like, I wouldn’t know how to be. I don’t know about this whole being a lady thing, cause I still burp in public and I do very unladylike things, but you know, they taught me how to, how to receive love.” (Line 697)

Participant two explicitly related her interpersonal development to her struggles with jealousy and insecurity in romantic relationships, explaining that her experience in AA helped her gain a new perspective on love.

“I think really what most women want is to be cherished—and I think maybe men want that too! And it might look a little different or something, they might interpret some things a little differently, but really what they want is to be adored...And I do things in my relationship where like, S- job is to wash the floors and every time he does it he has to say, do you notice anything different? Whereas, when I scrub the toilet I don’t come in and go, hey, did you notice anything? And I could say, and I would say in the past, hey, you live here too! There’s no reason you shouldn’t do that, I don’t think you necessarily need any extra praise about that. But instead I’ll say, oh, honey! It looks like a white tornado came through here, I’m so pleased! I just make a big fuss about it, which makes him want to do it more! So maybe that’s manipulation, I guess? But it’s also like, you know, it’s the same thing you would do with your child, you really praise them for things.” (Line 589)

Participant five emphasized her experience having lost control as a parent, and the idea that AA gave her a life she couldn’t have imagined, as a mother and a professional (see Education/growth section below).

6. Education, growth and improving oneself as a priority and life orientation

Four out of five participants spoke explicitly about education, pursuing higher education and/or a career, and encouraging others to pursue these things. Participant four was adamant that school should be considered as an option, logically and methodically and is not necessarily a part of recovery, but shared that it was part of her recovery. She said, “I wasn’t that coherent—that cognizant of my mental health, but everybody said B-, you need to go to college, you’re dumb as a brick, you need to go to school.” (Line 125) For participant one, education and growth were understood in a broader context of ongoing growth. She said she has encouraged most of her sponsees to further their education, and added,

“Yeah, I encourage growth, I encourage growth. Um, and I guess that’s my big thing in life, although I think I’m at a point where I feel really serene—I mean, I’m seventy years old. How much more do you want out of life than what I have? You know? A sober daughter would be nice, because she’s better to travel with, but um, I really think I’ve got the best of all possible worlds. I can work the land when I need to work the land. I can work my spiritual self when I need to work that. I am obviously working on my physical self.” (Line 756)

Participant five’s narrative centered on a sense of helplessness and reactivity early in life when she feared abusive boyfriends, entered a destructive, loveless marriage for safety and convenience, and only found her own calling far later as an adult and a mother.

“So I get into this program, I went through it, and my second year I was in an internship at B- High School, and at the end of that internship I was hired. So, a couple of years ago I retired after 28 years of a counseling career. And um, it was a job beyond my wildest dreams. It was a job I would have done for free. But my definition of a great life is, you find your passion and then find a way to get paid for it. And so, my school counseling career, here I am a former child abuser, working with kids. Having a heart for them because I’ve been at the bottom, and I have a heart for kids who’ve been at the bottom.” (Line 437)

The narrative of participant two centered almost entirely around her passion for nursing, and her efforts to navigate and manage a career in nursing which allowed her access to drugs of all kinds, with the knowledge that she was an addict. She ended up being able to translate her own experience into mentoring and supporting other addicted nurses.

7. Distinction between theoretical versus experiential and valuing of the practical and pragmatic

A seventh theme that emerged had to do with a shared sense that there is a crucial distinction between treatment (education) and recovery (practice) that is often missed or misunderstood. This theme is difficult to parse out since it is possible that there is a regional or demographic factor regarding these opinions, but it was emphasized enough by four participants, and mentioned by the fifth, that it warrants comment. Significantly, none of the five participants interviewed credit treatment with their recovery, or even the initiation of their recovery. Participant two entered treatment at one point, but left and continued to drink and use. None of the other four participants made any reference to having been in treatment, and participant one expressed disdain for treatment centers, saying, “Luckily I didn’t go through a treatment center.” She went on to distinguish between treatment, as a form of education, and recovery as something very experiential and clearly distinct from education. “Because what the treatment centers—what they have, they have some of the education about what’s a chronic alcoholic, but for people who go through treatment centers to stay sober, they have to go to AA.” (Line 168)

Participant four used similarly disparaging language when referring to treatment and how she believes it has impacted AA culture, and also conveyed a sense that it is undiplomatic or unpopular to express these subversive opinions.

“It’s been whitewashed, it has been treatment-ized—I think treatment and the courts have screwed it up, they have screwed up the beautiful purity and unconditional love that is alcoholics anonymous, and we’ve created cliques, exclusivity and—ok now, I need to stop with my opinions because it will just piss me off.” (Line 272)

8. Sponsorship

In a certain sense, sponsorship is a problematic theme, since it is so pervasive in AA literature and culture that it would be unlikely for anyone in AA to share her story without making reference to sponsorship in some form. At the same time, all five women elaborated on aspects of sponsorship that help to flesh out the idea of a relationship that is not always captured or even implied when literature refers to sponsorship. All five participants spoke about their experience with sponsorship in terms that emphasized reciprocity, equality, accountability and humility. Sometimes participants seemed to be refuting an idealized, almost archetypal sponsorship relationship they had heard about, and other times they seemed only to be sharing a sense of relationship that is based on holding and accountability and was not juxtaposed with anything else. Participant two shared a characteristically skeptical opinion of expertise when she described a sponsor she valued by saying, “[she was] not one of those sponsors who would give you advice about stuff she didn’t really know about.” (Line 548) Participant three highlighted the relational growth and learning aspect of sponsorship in the following way:

“That’s also been another amazing difference of like, I’m going through something and I don’t know how to get through it and it’s frustrating, and the first

person I think of calling is my sponsor, a woman in the program who's not gonna judge me for whatever it is, how silly it might be or whatever. And like, sharing that experience with me." (Line 620)

Referring to a former sponsor early in sobriety, participant four said, "She was just an amazing woman. And she talked about things like, having to drink the men under the table. And that's how I had to drink. Basically, she read my mail, she told my story. And... god puts the people I sponsor in front of me." (Line 96)

Participant one told me that she didn't even know if she qualified for the study because when she was new in AA, they didn't approach sponsorship in the same way, and there was much more fluidity in how people addressed and worked through the steps. But she said that she has gone on to work the steps, and to sponsor other women, though she does it in a distinctly subversive, unique way that is designed to challenge the cookie cutter model of treatment and recovery she perceives as having emerged in recent years, in order to address the individual needs of each person. She explained that she usually turns people down when they ask her to sponsor them, and justified her approach in the following way:

"I would be doing a disservice to somebody who needed a sponsor who was gonna sit down and say, call me, I want you to call me at four o'clock every day, I want you to read this page in the big book, then I want you to read this page in the book—I would be doing a disservice to the person who needs that kind of guidance." (Line 843)

9. Emphasis on accountability and honesty

All five participants emphasized accountability as a central aspect of the AA program. They gave multiple examples of how friendship, sponsorship, service positions in the AA fellowship and working the steps led them to evolve a lifestyle of honesty,

facilitated by holding relationships in which the expectation that they would show up and willingly take responsibility led to character development and self-insight. They also insisted that accountability and honesty are as crucial for a lasting program of recovery as water is to a fish. Participant one put it simply when she said, “If you’re not honest and you don’t have the desire, you’re not going to make it. You’re going to be out there drinking again.” (Line 685) Participant four expressed a resonant sentiment when she said, “I am very clear about, if you’re not honest you’ll get loaded and die.” (Line 368) Participant two made similar statements to these, and also added a dimension to the idea of accountability, by suggesting that her own mind cannot be trusted, and that AA provides a kind of backdrop against which she can more clearly observe her own intentions. Referring to her early days in AA, she said, “I didn’t really talk much. I mean, I was kind of—I think god struck me dumb, really, because I am a talker. And I also use that, those uh, verbal gymnastics and intellect and my great knowledge of literature to like, don’t look at the man behind the curtain!” (Line 347)

Participant two also displayed insight about practical ways that the structure of AA provides opportunities for self-reflection and accountability. Elaborating on her ideas about different meeting structures, specifically whether it is better to have a practice of calling on members or volunteering, she said,

“The trouble is, sometimes—[volunteering] just leads to too much thinking for me, ‘cause I sat there thinking, I think I know that I have something to say, but is it worthwhile? Should I just let them talk? It was just, thinking about me the whole time! And I couldn’t really listen! I got into too much thinking about self.” (Line 705)

She seemed to convey a sense that AA structure allows her to perceive her own feelings and motivations more clearly. Affirming that sentiment, participant four said simply, “We love you enough to tell you the flipping truth!” (Line 73)

10. Acceptance, surrender, and willingness to let go of control

In varied ways, each of the five participants pointed to surrender and letting go of control as pivotal in their recovery. Perhaps most poignant was participant one’s description of her sense of herself as being in her last years, in the final phase of her life. She spoke in poetic, glowing terms about her ability, now, with almost forty years of sobriety, to imagine a “beautiful death.” (Line 805) Participant two said, “I don’t live in fear and I don’t have to ... control,” (Line 560) when elaborating on her history of abusive relationship and PTSD. She also described a particular moment when she felt she had reached the end of her rope and was willing to step out of the driver’s seat, so to speak, for the first time in her life. She shared the following experience about driving home from work at the hospital one night:

“I just got out of the car and I was like, screaming at the sky saying, if you’re so powerful, if you love me so much, why do you let me live like this? And uh, I don’t think that was really the right approach so I didn’t really get any help from that supposed prayer but um, in November of 1988 I was just at the end of my rope—and I don’t know why I didn’t just quit work, go to AA, those options didn’t really occur to me, I’ve never been able to stop myself, somebody always had to step in and stop me.” (Line 224)

Participant five shared a different sense of surrender. Referring to the neglect and abuse of her past, she shared an experience surrounding the death of her mother:

“...I grieved the real mother that I never had. And I faced um, you know, you let go, you keep wishing for a better past. And then you grow to the point where you see that you never got one and you never will. And so what the program has taught me is how to make peace with my past. How not to shut the door on it, how

not to regret it. How to look at myself, as a young woman, with compassion instead of hatred.” (Line 507)

In the above quote, participant five elucidates an additional aspect of surrender that has to do with abandoning attempts at control and letting the past remain in the past. All five participants shared stories that were resonant with this idea.

11. Trust

There is a sense in which trust is present in most or all of the aforementioned themes. Yet, trust is still distinct, if only or significantly because it was so frequently named. Two out of five participants spoke explicitly to belonging to a disempowered population (racial/ethnic minority and impoverished), and their comments regarding trust and the challenges implicit in gaining trust were profound. Yet all five participants referred to trust often, whether directly or indirectly. Four out of five participants pointed to the sense of trust they felt on entering the rooms of AA, regardless of the gender of present members. The remaining participant spoke at length about her experience of gaining trust through relationship that was not sexual or romantic in nature. Referring to her minority status, she said, “You know, there’s a lot of trust issues, and there’s a lot of white people, and I’m like, riding in their cars to who-knows-where in the middle of the woods. And you know, nothing weird ever happened—I was sort of expecting the ball to drop, you know?” (Line 127)

Referring to her status as one of the only women in AA in her area, participant five shares a similar sense of wonder at her experience of safety, referring to a neighbor who took her to her first meeting,

“And...she takes me into this meeting and these men look at me and say, Al-Anon is in the next room, cause I’m young. And I looked at them and I thought, you have no idea who I am, I’m going to prove you wrong! Because that was my theory, I’m going to prove you wrong! I’m a coward but I’m a feisty coward.” (Line 394)

Later, she added, “those men were like father figures that I’d never had. They were loving and kind and tolerant and they didn’t judge me. And through all of my insanity, they kept saying, keep coming back.” (Line 402)

12. Valuing of autonomy, manifesting in rejection of hierarchy and prioritization of independence

As with several prior themes, this one is related and interwoven. There was a sense in which most participants were often speaking in opposition to a prevailing notion that they didn’t articulate. In certain cases, the prevailing, mainstream model of treatment was set up as a sort of straw man, but often there is a sense of striving and individuation that does not appear to be in opposition to anything. When asked to elaborate on her experience of being one of the only women in AA in her region, participant one had this to say:

“Well, I would guess until the beginning of the 80’s for at least five years. And the old guys used to really razz me. Because here I was, 31, I was short and I was cute, and [you] spilled more than [I] could drink, and I said well good, I’m glad you did! Because it got you here and I’m glad that you’re here. You know? And for years, as long as I was an area officer, when I got up to speak at the podium at the area, they would shout, stand up, stand up we can’t see you! And I would say, that’s ok you don’t have to see me, can you hear me?? Because they never had any problems hearing me, so, as long as you can hear me that’s ok, you don’t have to see me. As long as I was the area chair-person I had a foot stool I’d stand up on. And I had a barstool I’d sit up on so I was even with the mic, and when I went to stand up I had the foot stool I’d stand up on. Because as chairperson you really need control of the floor.” (Line 205)

Regarding her first mentor, an older man, participant one said, “If I hadn’t had that experience, if I hadn’t got that guy who was just so straight-laced, who let me grow at my own pace, he didn’t push me he didn’t prod me he didn’t make me uncomfortable, he just let me grow.” (Line 822) In a similar vein, participant four added, “Sponsorship was not ownership.” (Line 221)

All five women shared stories that highlighted their experience as people who were navigating newly found agency, and ability to maneuver in a world which had formerly felt mysterious and controlling. Regarding her newfound sense of self-awareness and self-control, and how alcohol impacted her self-expression, participant three shared,

“So, it’s just like, that process has been really hard for me, I think, the emotional—the emotional thing. Because sometimes I feel like I want to be emotional at some things and can’t, because I’m so used to just closing it in, and I feel really, uh, I feel like I never get that release. And alcohol did that for me. I would get really angry, or sad, or just frustrated or whatever, and then my thing was, I’d grab a drink! You know, and I’d get through it, I’d cry over it, I’d throw stuff or break things, or just do whatever, or get crazy, you know. Just let it all out.” (Line 238)

13. Shared experience

A valuing of shared experience was present in all five narratives. Each participant emphasized areas where the witnessing of her experience in the story or actions of another, lent valuable self-awareness and a profound sense of belonging where previously there had been none. Because belonging was so pivotal in leading to a sense of trust and accountability, all five participants seemed to suggest that some degree of recognizable, shared experience was in fact essential to embarking on a journey of recovery. Participant one stated, “We have to be a homogenous society.” (Line 937) Regarding women’s

meetings and their value, she went on to say, “I think sometimes you can get too specialized and you lose the bigger message. And so yeah, I wasn’t threatened by the old guys.” (Line 235) Participant two echoed this sentiment, but elaborated by saying,

“this is what I tell sponsees, is you need to identify with us, but we need to identify with you too. And if you need to insist that you’re somehow unique then some of these old-timers, or maybe not old-timers, who are strictly alcoholic are going to think, well I can’t really help that person because I don’t have that experience. Then you miss out on something you might have been able to use.” (Line 303)

Participant four shared experience of this very ideal from the other direction when she referred to the older men who comprised the majority of AA members in the small town where she got sober,

“What they could have done was really ostracize me or isolate me as a young person, but they didn’t, they said, oh no honey, you’re no different than us, no-no honey you’re age doesn’t matter, no-no honey, what’s between your legs doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter—your race, your sex, your creed, your religion, native or non-native doesn’t matter. Race, sex doesn’t matter. It’s all about getting sober.” (Line 19)

While she said she understood the value of women’s meetings, participant four also had this to say: “That’s another thing they don’t do that they used to do. I [would] walk into a men’s meeting and I’m like, I’m sorry I didn’t realize this was a men’s meeting—I’m out of here, and they’re like, no no, no! If your ass is falling off, you’re welcome to stay.”

(Line 881)

Discussion

Thirteen themes were identified through qualitative analysis of five participant interviews (see Table 1). Themes could be loosely interpreted as relating to intimacy, power and connection versus isolation. Shared experience and feeling understood were also prominent as a thread throughout themes and across participants.

Not all themes were prominent across participants, but all themes were present in at least four out of five stories. Because of the small sample size, and the subject matter, it made sense to explore the presented themes in context of and compared with themes identified in White and Chaney's *Metaphors of Transformation* (1993) (See Table 2). This method of comparison contextualized the current study and allowed for a more in depth exploration of themes that appear to have a gender specific component, picking up the conversation where White and Chaney left off, and grounding their observations in the phenomenological, experiential language and methodology of the current study. As stated in the introduction, the current study can be seen as a response to *Metaphors of Transformation*, by White and Chaney (1993). *Metaphors of Transformation* was undertaken as a preliminary effort to identify and explore prominent themes and metaphors in mainstream recovery and treatment, with the assumption that in order to be successful, recovering women must adapt strategies and technologies that evolved to treat empowered, white men.

The following section will therefore be organized around White and Chaney's structure of characteristically masculine and characteristically feminine metaphors for transformation and recovery. Quotes from and references to the current study will be

provided in the form of a dialogue with, and an effort will be made to support or disconfirm and discuss themes raised in *Metaphors of Transformation* (Table 2).

Table 2. Themes From <i>Metaphors of Transformation</i> (1993)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Powerlessness versus Empowerment</i> 2. <i>Hitting Bottom (pain) versus Seeing the Top</i> 3. <i>We (connectedness) versus I (individuation)</i> 4. <i>Power Greater Than (Outside) the Self, versus Power Within the Self</i> 5. <i>Focused Attention versus Divided Attention</i> 6. <i>Guilt versus Shame</i> 7. <i>Self-Effacement (Humility) versus Self-Affirmation</i> 8. <i>Softening Judgment versus Learning to Judge</i> 9. <i>Achieving Silence versus Breaking Silence</i> 10. <i>Service to Others versus Acts of Self-Care</i> 11. <i>Dependency versus Autonomy</i> 12. <i>Blindness to Safety versus Sensitivity to Physical/Psychological Safety</i> 13. <i>Blindness to Image versus Sensitivity to Body Image</i> 14. <i>The Metaphors of Time and Timing</i> 15. <i>Recovery versus Discovery</i> 16. <i>The Dominator Model versus the Partnership Model</i> 17. <i>An Escape From Dualism</i>

While White and Chaney (1993) make an explicit distinction between masculine and feminine metaphors, experiences and language, this study sought to further emphasize the limitations of an explicitly gendered language around recovery and experience in general. Implicit in this approach is the idea that a spectrum of experience is available to people of all genders, but certain experiences are culturally conditioned in certain populations and impact how people are able to make use of resources that are available to them. Keeping this in mind, some places where distinctions between masculine and feminine metaphors seem not to hold up may be seen as still supporting differences between characteristically/traditionally masculine vs. feminine styles. Simply put, the current study hopes to extend and complicate the conversation begun by White and Chaney, holding the tension between respect for difference and the potential for a problematic essentializing of gendered experience. While all of White and Chaney's identified metaphors (Table 2) proved to be relevant and resonant with themes identified in the current study, certain of White and Chaney's themes were interpreted in ways that were inconsistent with the current findings (ie., *Softening Judgment versus Learning to Judge*). Other themes emerged so clearly and pervasively that they were relevant to all five participant narratives and most identified themes from the current study (eg., *Dependency versus Autonomy*, and *Powerlessness versus Empowerment*). Even themes that were overwhelmingly salient and complementary manifested in subtly different ways, and these tensions will be explored in the following sections.

White and Chaney suggest that there are “differences in the key ideas addicted men and women use to initiate, organize and sustain their recovery” (1993, p. 1). The

seventeen metaphors proposed by White and Chaney are designed to highlight important areas of thought, language and orientation where women may differ significantly from men in their experience of recovery. White and Chaney acknowledge the danger of simply replacing old stereotypes with current ones, but argue that it is worth the risk in order to arrive at a broader, more accurate picture of women's recovery that isn't adapted to or forced into a masculine structure of experience. They say,

“mainstream assessment, treatment and recovery technology in the addictions field was developed based on experience with men. Most of the basic paradigms, principles and practices of the field had been hardened and set before women arrived in great numbers as clients, volunteers or professional staff” (p. 3).

Central to White and Chaney's argument is the suggestion that culturally empowered individuals respond differently to decreasing competence than those who are culturally disempowered. If metaphors make sense of and “provide a cognitive cornerstone” (p. 8) for moving through experience and moving forward in recovery, then it makes sense to explore and assess the validity of metaphors besides traditionally masculine ones that evolved in a context of relative agency. The following section will explore each of White and Chaney's seventeen metaphors (in italics) and provide supporting and/or disconfirming quotes and references from the current study to elaborate and refine upon the proposed metaphors.

Powerlessness vs. Empowerment: Acceptance vs. powerlessness. White and Chaney suggest that a central difference between the experience of men and women in recovery might center around the historically empowered position of men and the relatively disempowered position held by women. They suggest that “Cultural empowerment bestows a mantle of superiority; cultural disempowerment creates an

unending succession of wounds to one's legitimacy and value." (p. 10) Women are not enculturated to believe in their own power or agency, so there is a sense in which surrender might be experienced as a further injury. For men, this leveling of ego is likely to be interpreted as a breakthrough, an experience of self outside of cultural paradigm, a "breakthrough in self-perception" (p. 10) In light of this distinction, it is easy to see how old school AA practices of tough love, confrontation technology and keeping things simple might help move men forward, but re-victimize women as well as members of other disenfranchised populations. Findings from the current study support this interpretation, and suggest that at least for some women, an approach that relies heavily on confrontational strategies and does not allow for individuality and nuanced experience is likely to either inspire rebelliousness or drive some female members away from the fellowship. Participant two shared her experience in a treatment center that relied on confrontation, and her sense that it was completely unhelpful, and potentially damaging to her and her children. As a woman with an abusive marriage in her past, she might be seen as having been particularly vulnerable and sensitive to abuses of power in a program dependent on obedience and confrontation. While participant two was able to find long-term sobriety and recovery in AA, much of her growth and healing seemed to center around experiences where she was able to advocate for herself. This supports White and Chaney's assertion regarding surrender and loss of control. "For culturally empowered men, recovery begins with the experience of surrender to one's powerlessness and loss of control. For culturally disempowered women, recovery begins with the experience of empowerment—recognizing and embracing the power to shape one's own destiny." (p.

11) Participant two provided a further example of this when she shared her experience of meeting with a representative from the nursing board.

“And somebody said to me...well, do you want a lawyer to go in there with you? Then I got scared and I said, what do I need a lawyer for? And she said, well I don’t know, I just am asking, you have the right to have one and I thought, no, I’m not going to have a lawyer. I don’t want this to be adversarial. I want to be...I want it all to be off of me.” (Line 279)

White and Chaney’s suggestion that empowerment may be as important, or more important than acknowledging powerlessness for recovering women relates to several themes that emerged from the current study, including rejection of hierarchy in AA; history of violent, controlling relationships; accountability and honesty and also, the importance of acceptance, surrender and letting go of control. While these may seem contradictory in a certain sense, the goal here is not to throw out characteristically male metaphors and replace them with characteristically female ones, but to complicate and flesh out the experience of women for whom metaphors that speak to an empowered societal role are inaccurate or don’t tell the whole story. All five participants shared experiences that emphasize the value of empowerment and achieving a sense of agency. But surrender, acceptance and letting go of control were prominent in all five narratives as well. Participant two shared a story that highlighted the complexity of her experience around surrender:

“I just got out of the car and I was like, screaming at the sky saying, if you’re so powerful, if you love me so much, why do you let me live like this? And uh, I don’t think that was really the right approach so I didn’t really get any help from that supposed prayer but um, in November of 1988 I was just at the end of my rope—and I don’t know why I didn’t just quit work, go to AA, those options didn’t really occur to me. I’ve never been able to stop myself, somebody always had to step in and stop me.” (Line 224)

This excerpt speaks to participant two's lack of agency, and her awareness that a history of dependence on others was problematic, but also the idea that, paradoxically, surrender is part of how she might achieve greater agency.

Hitting Bottom (pain) vs. Seeing the Top (hope); enabling vs. empowering. White and Chaney point to hitting bottom as an effective motivational crisis for empowered white men, but question whether hitting bottom as a metaphor, might have little meaning for disempowered, disenfranchised people. One refrain commonly heard around AA circles is, *how bad does it have to get?* This question makes sense in the context of compulsive substance use contributing to a downward spiral in which a previously successful individual finds that his addiction leads to loss of financial stability, productivity, meaningful relationships, mental health, confidence and self-respect. That metaphor might be far less meaningful to someone who never has rarely experienced stability, agency, self-respect, etcetera. Simply put, the question, *how bad does it have to get*, doesn't make sense if it was never good in the first place, and throws the whole concept of rehabilitation into question. This distinction was born out in the stories of all five participants, and was especially relevant to the themes around sponsorship as participants sorted out their feelings and expressed their opinions about what kinds of help are appropriate to provide to people at various stages of recovery. There is a sense in which all five participants were working to strike a balance between supporting other women in AA, and drawing them into the fellowship, and the other extreme of encouraging those women to gain their own balance and achieve a sense of accountability and independence. Participant three, the newest to recovery with four years of sustained

sobriety, talked about her efforts to balance helping behavior with her desire to encourage independence and agency in her sponsees. Referring to her sponsees, she said:

“I do a lot of checking in on them. Like, how are you doing, how did your dentist appointment go, what’s going on with this—I feel like, I am sort of trying to learn how to balance that out a little bit because they also need to learn to have some accountability for their program a little bit. I’ve reminded the one you know, hey, you need to reach out, you need to keep this alive because I want to get you through your steps and then you can pass it on to someone else and like, it’s so easy to let it go by the wayside.” (Line 809)

Regarding pain as a motivator, participant two spoke directly to her sense of alcohol as a relief when she said, “...I never got any help for what had just happened to me, you know, four years of being beaten and brutalized and other things too. So I just kind of, I thought that was over and stuffed it away. But I think that when I picked up a drink and started smoking pot that it meant more to me than maybe it might have, just because it was like, relief.” (Line 17) In a paradoxical way, participant two’s discovery of alcohol and drugs remedied emotional problems that stemmed from her past. It could be argued that her abusive marriage was an experiential bottom for her. At least, it is difficult to interpret her path as one in which there is a clear descent from functionality and agency to incompetence and failure. For people with stories like this, White and Chaney suggest that it may be more useful to consider a metaphor that emphasizes hope, rather than hitting bottom. Perhaps it is more important to consider how we might convince these people that things could be good, that there could be a top, since perhaps all they know is the bottom.

Participant three also talked about the sense in which alcohol could not be identified as unequivocally problematic, since it was a solution for and provided relief from

emotional distress and feelings of helplessness. Referring to her dangerously violent ex-boyfriend and how alcohol helped her survive, she said,

“[Alcohol] sort of molded, it helped mold me, I felt, into a person that I wanted to be. Like, I felt like I couldn’t be that person sober. I couldn’t be emotional, I couldn’t say what was on my mind, I couldn’t just not care...and it was just—like, when I drank was the only time I could ever talk back to my ex, and even then it was like, super dangerous. But, you know, it was just...and even then it was like, when I drank I felt like I could get the balls up enough to leave.” (Line 155)

Even for women who appear to have successfully adopted and assimilated the characteristically male metaphors and themes of AA, certain aspects of female experience must take into account differences in power in order to be accurate. While participant four promoted an approach to recovery that was largely consistent with an old-school, confrontational style, she was also adamant that recovering alcoholics in AA have an obligation to support each other in a way that is sometimes interpreted as enabling, or rescuing. Specifically, participant four was critical of AA members who don’t want to have contact with active alcoholics. As White and Chaney point out, some of these rescuing or enabling kinds of behaviors and activities might actually be pivotal in igniting a process of recovery in women (there is a parallel here with the idea of non-compliance in mental health care – historically, many providers wanted people to display a willingness and motivation to engage in treatment, and discharged them if they were unwilling to do so in an effort to prevent enabling or collusion – yet in the process, treatment may be denied to those who need it most). In order to appreciate fully and accurately the experience of women and minorities, we must take into consideration aspects of learned helplessness and learned hopelessness that may be a factor in determining what modalities and methods are likely to be successful in reaching certain

addicts. Rather than interpreting characteristically feminine helping behaviors as enabling, White and Chaney suggest these behaviors may be a means of infusing hope; “It is our energy, our caring, our hope, our belief in them—the existence of an empowering relationship—that must initiate the leap of faith into recovery. If we wait for them to hit bottom, they will die.” (p. 13)

While the idea that pain as a motivator is likely to be less meaningful for women and other disempowered populations, this is one of several areas where White and Chaney may overreach slightly in suggesting that this insight might be applied to women generally. Participant four, in particular, used characteristically masculine language throughout her interview, and espoused a confrontational style. At one point she made some interesting comments about pain as a motivator, suggesting that this is a reason to avoid antidepressants and other medications in early recovery, since medications may prevent a person from experiencing potent, productive pain.

“I don’t know how to say it because I don’t talk about it too much...I needed to—for me, I need to feel, and I needed to feel like that absolute piece of whale shit, bottom of the barrel, I needed every fucking feeling, every—all of that snot slinging emotion, fetal position on the couch for a year—which I did—I needed that...I needed that emotion, those feelings. I needed to be present for those feelings because that pain, that gut-wrenching hellfire fuck the world pain is what motivated me to get better.” (Line 811)

We (connectedness) vs. I (individuation). These metaphors were prominent in all five interviews, and were also relevant to the first metaphors discussed, empowerment vs. powerlessness. As with many other distinctions and differences in feminine experience, this one showed up in a spectrum, where exploring feminine narratives can help to flesh out human experience and provide a richer, more accurate description of experience, but

should not be interpreted too literally as women having an alternative experience that differs fundamentally from that of men. In fact all five participants emphasized connection in the fellowship of AA as crucial to their recovery, but also shared stories that conveyed the importance of individuation, and the significance of events and relationships that contributed to a growing sense of agency and independence. White and Chaney suggest that in general, women tend to evolve recovery maps and benefit from narratives that emphasize independence, whereas men are likely to evolve and benefit from recovery maps that emphasize intimacy. This interpretation highlights aspects of recovery that provide corrective experiences. While it is a compelling theory, findings from the current study can be interpreted as challenging the association between the two ends of this spectrum - isolation versus connection - and male versus female experience, respectively. While the metaphorical spectrum proposed by White and Chaney is useful and certainly highlights an important aspect of experience that is relevant to recovery, the current research does not support the idea that female addicts are more connected than their male counterparts. In fact, all five participants were profoundly isolated in addiction, and described learning to connect as a central metaphor for their recovery. While White and Chaney's suggestion that women are culturally programmed for connection is well taken, this does not necessarily mean that alcoholic women have a tendency toward fusion and enmeshment or are more successful than men at forging interpersonal bonds. In fact, cultural pressure toward connection for women may compound the effects of alcoholic isolation, leading alcoholic women to experience themselves as all the more deviant and deficient due to their inability to form lasting

connections. After all, White's research suggests that women have a tendency to hide their addiction longer and go into treatment later (1993, p. 3).

Still, themes of isolation and connection were prominent and powerful throughout all five interviews and related to identified themes of connection vs. isolation; sponsorship; intimacy between women; autonomy. During her interview, participant three focused overwhelmingly on the evolution of her sobriety in terms of the relationships she has been able to form with women, and which were simply out of reach when she was isolated in her drinking. Regarding her former isolation and the initial strangeness of forming relationships with women, she said:

“And, so yeah, when all these ladies surrounded me after the meeting I was just like, this is weird. I don't know. Because men are such a big part of my story, getting any kind of attention from women was like, foreign to me. I was the girl who always said, Oh, I get along with dudes better than girls. I never really gave girls a chance though, either.” (Line 75)

Participant four shared a similar sentiment when she said, “The inappropriate sexuality that I exhibited, I needed to be around women. I needed to learn that women are not a problem, women are not the enemy, women are not fucking all bitches. I hated women, I didn't want to be around women because I couldn't manipulate them. Because I couldn't con them.” (Line 314)

Participant two expressed a similar opinion, saying, “I didn't have a good record of forming a true partnership with another human being” (Line 405). She went on to say, “the most valuable part of my program is friendships with women” (Line 767)

Power greater than (outside) the self vs. power with the self. This distinction, suggested by White and Chaney, showed up in some very interesting ways in the

narratives of all five participants. It was associated with themes of connection, female intimacy and acceptance/surrender. In line with White And Chaney's suggestion that tapping into previously unknown internal strengths may be as important for recovering women as finding a higher power outside the self, all five women emphasized fellowship, pointing to loving, supportive relationships with other women in AA as the truly miraculous reality of their recovery. All five women interviewed shared stories about a higher power, but the overwhelming content of their narratives, and the daily maintenance measures they described, emphasized ability to connect with others as the real saving grace. Describing a former sponsor, participant four said, "She was just an amazing woman. And she talked about things like, having to drink the men under the table. And that's how I had to drink. Basically, she read my mail, she told my story. And uh, you know god puts in front of you—god puts the people I sponsor in front of me." (Line 96) This quote conveys a sentiment often repeated in AA, that god speaks through other people. In that regard, it is the openness of the individual that allows her to hear and make sense of the message. For participant three, the capacity to love and be loved seems to have the qualities of a higher power.

"these relationships with women have been so instrumental in, in even my relationship with my husband today. I am the woman that I am today because of women in recovery. You know, like, I wouldn't know how to be. I don't know about this whole being a lady thing, cause I still burp in public and I do very unladylike things, but you know, they taught me how to, how to receive love." (Line 697)

Interestingly, these quotes convey a sense that participants moved from identifying with an outside source to accepting responsibility and having accountability. This orientation is reminiscent of White and Chaney's suggestion that empowerment

might be as crucial for women as accepting powerlessness, and individuation may be as important as connection. The stories these women told to share their sense of a higher power suggest that letting go of control doesn't have to become a reliance on something outside. Rather, the ability to let go of control and lean on each other allowed them greater independence and freedom. This idea supports White and Chaney's suggestion that, "Where turning their will and their life over to something outside the self might be a new experience for men, it would be business as usual for many women." (p. 16) This is also an area where overstating the distinction between a characteristically male and characteristically female version of the experience is likely to lead to inaccuracy. Instead, we might enrich and deepen the idea of reliance on a higher power by emphasizing the aspect of this experience that is internal, and relies on interconnection between AA members, whether male or female. After all, participants appeared comfortable with characteristically male imagery and metaphor quite often, particularly participant four: "...they said you better find something more powerful than yourself because you can't keep you sober. Maybe it was because I made the group my higher power and while I worked through my resentment—I was raised catholic—and while I worked through that also found a god of my understanding." (Line 202)

Focused Attention vs. Divided Attention. White and Chaney suggest that traditional AA has emphasized focused attention, while women may have a tendency toward divided attention (focusing on many things simultaneously, particularly evident in parenting and homemaking). It might be argued that men have excelled at prioritizing historically and it is a manifestation of the traditionally male orientation that has led

treatment counselors to frame secondary obligations as “distractions” (p. 16). Indeed, the post second-wave feminist assertion that women who work and have families actually have two jobs is relevant here, and highlights the now commonly accepted fact that women tend to bear more of the load of household chores. This is salient when it comes to an investigation of AA, and comes across explicitly in the chapter of AA’s Basic Text (2001), “To Wives,” where Bill W. (co-founder of AA) appealed to the wives of alcoholics to be patient with their husbands once they entered recovery. Although a footnote has been added acknowledging that women can be alcoholics too, this chapter intractably inserts an association between women and enabling, and women as caretakers, into the history and culture of AA. Yet, as women grew to be a significant portion of the AA population, they still were expected to adopt the singleness of purpose strategy used by men, with no acknowledgement that those men in early recovery often had women taking care of business, paying bills, taking care of children and generally holding down the fort while their husbands went to meetings and made twelve-step calls. White and Chaney make the welcome point that for women, sustained, divided attention is the only possible reality, even for women who are invested in recovery. These women, particularly mothers, are under pressure to attend meetings regularly, work the steps with a sponsor (until they begin taking other women through the steps), earn money through employment of some kind, and be there to provide adequate care for their children. This is an area where the adaptability and resourcefulness of women who get sober “in spite of” rather than “because of” the traditional, masculine model of recovery is especially clear. Participant five spoke about difficulties as a mother and wife, and her

struggles to connect with women and forge relationships in AA when men still far outnumbered women.

“And I started finding friends, my age with little kids. And so I started saying, let’s have lunch dates in the park. And we’d bring our kids and peanut butter sandwiches and we’d spread out a blanket and we’d have a meeting while they were on the swings. And that was my early experience of alcoholics anonymous. And more and more women were coming in, and I was feeling more and more a part of. But I never could go out after meetings with people for coffee because my husband was insanely jealous and worried about me and um. I felt duty-bound to get back home. And I felt duty-bound even when I’d go to Saturday noon meetings, to get back home. Because he wouldn’t think about making lunch for the kids, ever. They’d all be starving and I’d come in and I’d feel resentful and I’d slap on lunch. That way I’m pleasing them, pleasing everybody. So I get sober.” (Line 413)

This excerpt clearly illustrates the reality for many recovering women. While participant five was able to navigate the many demands in her life, an androcentric model of recovery pathologizes a woman’s attention to “distractions,” (other responsibilities like children) which may be seen as obstacles to treatment. Interpretations that don’t value a women’s attempt to balance all these aspects of her life will make her more likely to feel that she is failing, as she experiences herself as unable to meet the requirements of being a good AA member, or finds a sponsor’s suggestions impossible to follow. While alcoholics generally seem to show a propensity for rebelliousness and there are times when addressing resistance and stubbornness may be productive, there is a problem with automatically interpreting environmental and cultural factors as attitudinal, or as resistance. “To demand a singular focus on sobriety defies the reality that sobriety must be integrated in to the total fabric of women’s lives” (White and Chaney, p. 17).

This argument brings to mind another common refrain heard around AA, *Keep it Simple, Stupid*. While there is undoubtedly wisdom in this phrase which encourages

chronic intellectualizers to “give it a rest,” and discourages rationalization, there is also a sense in which women really may not be able to keep it simple. Particularly when we begin to consider the many factors in the life of an impoverished, single mother, for example. The mainstream model of AA encourages members to divide and conquer, to prioritize their recovery above all else, but many women may have a harder time doing this than men. It is worth noting that many meetings make a point to provide childcare so that mothers may attend without fear of disrupting the meeting. But it is also true that some meetings specify that children are not welcome, and other meetings are designated as “closed” (meaning only alcoholics are welcome) as a way to discourage members from bringing their children. “Men’s recovery is described in language that is hierarchical, linear and obsessively focused.” (White and Chaney, p. 18) Even the pathway metaphor, implying an orderly progression, from one step to the next, focusing on one thing at a time, seems to contrast with more traditionally feminine language in myth and literature, including metaphors that make use of circles, webs, mosaics nets, and patchwork imagery (p. 19).

White and Chaney’s suggestion that women may experience a less linear trajectory into and through recovery is supported by flexibility in sponsorship described by four participants of the current study. These women described relationships with sponsors that defied any hierarchical implications of AA, and emphasized reciprocity and mutual learning and growth, participant’s one and two went so far as to describe “co-sponsorship” relationships where the emphasis was on honesty and mutual accountability. Participant two, describing a former sponsor said she was “not one of

those sponsors who would give you advice about stuff she didn't really know about.”

(Line 548) She and participants three and four seemed to especially value responsiveness

and respect for the sponsee's individuality and dignity as qualities of a good sponsor.

Participant four spent a lot of time articulating her sense that designating people as

sponsees is offensive, and she espoused a mentorship model founded on dignity and

accountability.

“I don't call them sponsees, I find that very degrading. I know that when I came in here and they called me a young lady and a woman for the very first time in Alcoholics Anonymous, here we are, you know um, I know that our self esteem comes from within and our love comes from within, but it was somebody on the outside going, you are a young woman and a young lady, whether you think so or not, whether you believe it or not, you are a beautiful woman and a child of god. And I went, huh? Somebody else lifted me up and I was able to step up just a little bit more. Somebody opened that door and I was able to push it just a little bit more open. Wow, you mean I have some use here? Um, so I don't call them sponsees, a lot of people around here call them sponsees, I had a lady ask me, well what do you call them then? I said, I call them by name, ladies, women.” (Line 349)

This rejection of mainstream AA hierarchy expressed by all five participants resonated with a general dismissal of structure more broadly, and a lack of emphasis on completing steps in order. Participant one described it in the following way, “the steps are our internal program of how we recover. And after we get those steps down, we should be able to grow more.” (Line 141) She went on to say, “Like, the personal inventories, uh, your first steps—we never had to do a drunk-a-logue as my first step. You know? The first three steps, if you came in and you stayed in, everybody assumed you had done the first three steps. But nobody, nobody talked particularly about what step they were on, or how to work the steps.” (Line 172) This opinion is consistent with White and Chaney's suggestion that women's recovery trajectories may emphasize “serendipitous events” (p.

19) and what might be called higher power events, that continue to be digested and meaningful in evolving ways over time as these women retell their stories, and form recovery narratives.

While acknowledging the necessity for divided attention in the recovery processes of many women, it should be pointed out that a certain orientation toward simplicity and concrete prioritization showed up in the narratives of all five participants as well, particularly participant four who was adamant that she does not think. She talked about her decision-making process as a process of taking a “group conscience,” meaning that she essentially polls her trusted friends and mentors in AA, then proceeds with the next indicated action. She stated and restated her sense that thinking is dangerous for her, and finally said,

“When you’re hungry, eat. When you’re sad, cry. When you’re horny, jack off or get laid. But for god sakes, when you’re an alcoholic don’t drink because you’ll die. If you’re lonely, reach out. If you’re scared, get on your knees and reach out. And remember, always that no matter what, it’s gonna be ok. God’s not gonna drop me on my head. But don’t drink or use. Just don’t drink or use and there’s hope.” (Line 617)

Guilt vs. shame is an important distinction in the experience of recovering alcoholics and the current study lends support for some gender specificity in this area. Particularly relevant to this metaphorical distinction were themes of autonomy; Education and growth; theoretical vs. experiential. White and Chaney point to AA’s emphasis on disclosure as an area that is potentially damaging or re-traumatizing for people who have been victims of abuse or oppression in the past. While this certainly makes sense, it implies a certain powerlessness on the part of women who have dealt with abuse, that may not always resonate with their experience. All five participants alluded to histories of

abuse, but rather than feeling re-victimized by people in AA, these women had a tendency to take greater responsibility and consider carefully in what contexts they shared personal details. Participant two, a nurse, described her internal process around sharing details of her substance abuse in a group for recovering nurses, as opposed to at AA meetings.

“I ended up in that group for three years which was helpful to me because, um, I could really talk about stuff that I didn’t want to talk about in a meeting. I didn’t want to scare somebody when they’re thinking, god, my grandma’s in the hospital! You know, so um, that’s what was good for me, was an opportunity to just talk about that stuff, and I ended up running that group then, some years later.” (Line 438)

There are several ways to interpret this woman’s discretion in opening up about her history of substance use. First, some AA members might interpret her hesitance to share in AA meetings as resistance or a lack of willingness, and they might suggest that her concern for others is a form of rationalization or avoidance. It might also be argued that her concern for others is problematic in that it is a caretaking behavior. However, her experience of preserving a certain sense of privacy in meetings was interpreted by her as empowering. And in fact, she did find an appropriate, safe place to share that experience with other people who might benefit from it, and then to support others with similar experiences. There are parallels here to White and Chaney’s suggestion that survivors groups can be seen as providing a template for recovery that allows for the customization of a recovery plan that takes into account the individuality of the recovering individual and their particular needs.

Other participants emphasized the importance of ignoring difference. Participant one said, “We’ve got to be homogenous. We have to be a homogenous society.” (Line

937) At the same time, participant one emphasized the value of giving AA members new to recovery space to grow at their own speed and seek out whatever resources best meet their needs at that time as they develop a sense of independence and autonomy. She acknowledged that women's meetings can be very important and helpful in early recovery, but suggested that the goal is to become part of the larger AA community. Referring to someone who took her to meetings when she was new in recovery she said, "If I hadn't had that experience, if I hadn't got that guy who was just so straight-laced, who let me grow at my own pace, he didn't push me he didn't prod me he didn't make me uncomfortable, he just let me grow." (Line 822) This quote seems to speak to valuing of dignity and autonomy over undifferentiated disclosure that is often encouraged in newcomers and speaks to the importance of empowerment and growing at ones own pace that came across in all five narratives.

Another significant aspect of guilt and shame as metaphors for change in recovery centers around the idea of confession and amends as a technology through which esteem might be salvaged (p. 20). If, as White and Chaney suggest, "Where guilt is a self-indictment for doing; shame is an internalized indictment of being," then it follows that confession and amends may be less of a solution for women who tend to suffer more from shame than guilt (p. 20). There is an emphasis in AA literature and in the AA community on paying back the money, making financial amends, which may not be so relevant for women who are more likely than men to live in poverty, whether they are alcoholic or not. This emphasis neglects the possibility that some of the most shameful experiences are not transgressions that can be corrected in concrete ways. Simply put,

antidotes for guilt are unlikely to be effective in resolving shame. For the women interviewed, relief from shame came slowly, through a process of gaining self-esteem, as participant two put it, “I don’t think we get self-esteem from other people, I think we get self-esteem from the things that we do, and uh, having a purpose to ones life.” (Line 966) For these women, self-esteem emerged as they gained trust in their own ability to be accountable, to show up as friends, mothers, wives, sisters employees, and members of AA.

Cultural factors that compound and contribute to shame, aside from gender, have the potential to further complicate the resolution of shame. Participant three talked about her initial difficulty connecting with the AA fellowship in the following way.

“We would go out to meetings in E- and M-, and you know, it was super weird to me. It was just the community aspect of AA, just, it was awesome yet scary, almost. You know, there’s a lot of trust issues, and there’s a lot of white people, and I’m like, riding in their cars to who-knows-where in the middle of the woods. And you know, nothing weird ever happened—I was sort of expecting the ball to drop, you know?” (Line 125)

Participant four also referenced cultural elements and obstacles that she found a way to weave into her narrative:

“My experience as a woman in AA—I got sober up in Kodiak Alaska, so as a woman it was way different there than it is here. Because the male to female ratio is different—is so much more vast. Way more men. Ten men to—at least ten men to every one woman. And then there’s the aspect of me coming in, I got sober when I was 19, so, it was me—little me, little young me, with all these old, old men—fishermen. And a lot of natives and so forth. And so today...Alcoholics Anonymous has become rather structured, and I got sober—it was real redneck. Service work was, hey come on down and help me bait these tubs. And while we’re baiting tubs or building fishing nets or whatever, these guys out here were talking, and they’re talking about steps and they’re talking about sober.” (Line 3)

According to White and Chaney, Women for Sobriety and survivor models emphasize self-valuing and assertion where AA might be seen as encouraging indiscriminate disclosure (p. 21), in the service of leveling the ego and freedom from oppressive secrets that breed shame. One common theme that seemed to allow all five participants interviewed to contextualize their discrimination in when and with whom they opened up, was an emphasis on the big picture. Although all five participants subscribe fully to AA as a program of recovery, focusing on the broader context of AA and the values of AA as applied to their lives allowed them to make sense of differences in their experience, without feeling oppressed by pressure to conform. This may be particularly relevant for women who suffered abuse as children, since there is a real tension between assuming blame or taking responsibility (encouraged in AA), and appropriately assigning blame. White and Chaney suggest, “Where men seek to make restitution to those they have injured; many women seek real or symbolic confrontations with those who have injured them. “ (p. 21) To say it another way, a program of recovery must acknowledge some experiential difference between healing and resolving the effects of perpetration and healing and resolving the effects of victimization (p. 22). Without discarding the value of assuming responsibility and healing perpetration as a main focus of AA, we might consider that healing of victimization has been neglected in AA. This makes sense, given the evolution of AA as a means of treating white men (arguably more likely to be perpetrators than victims), but evolving treatment methods and technologies, in order to be accurate and effective, should include integration of victimization healing

technologies, in a non gender specific way – with the assumption that women can be perpetrators and men can be victims.

Self-effacement (humility) vs. self-affirmation. In a certain sense it is hard to tease this metaphorical distinction apart from the Powerlessness vs. Empowerment distinction also proposed in *Metaphors of Transformation* (see above). However, it is different enough to warrant attention, and showed up in the current study in resonant themes of assimilation of steps in life and work; humility; autonomy. “The language of AA (embedded in the twelve steps and twelve traditions) was designed to break the narcissistic bubble of the male alcoholic. It did this through a language of ego-confrontation and submission: words like powerless, unmanageable, wrongs, defects of character, and shortcomings” (White and Chaney, p. 22). White emphasizes the tendency for culturally empowered men to respond to decreasing competency with greater shows of aggression and grandiosity, which suggests that some ego-leveling is in order. Jean Kirkpatrick comments, “I’ve never met a single alcoholic woman who needed more humility. I believe that women need exactly the opposite—the self-confidence to stay sober” (White and Chaney, p. 22). These comments seem to suggest that working toward humility, like accepting powerlessness, may be detrimental for some women. However, this may be another area where overstating the distinction between male and female experience of recovery creates a false dichotomy. After all, each of the five participants interviewed emphasized the attaining of humility as a crucial aspect of her recovery. Referring to AA practices of encouraging those new to sobriety to stay quiet in meetings and listen, participant two had this to say: “And I didn’t really talk much. I mean, I was

kind of—I think god struck me dumb, really, because I am a talker. And I also use that, those uh, verbal gymnastics and intellect and my great knowledge of literature to like, don't look at the man behind the curtain!" (Line 347)

Participant two's comments are fascinating in light of the AA valuing of humility, and admonishments commonly heard, such as, *take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth!* Much like her decision to share certain kinds of stories only with other nurses, participant two engaged in an internal process of evaluating and making decisions about how to be honest and humble, while maintaining a sense of dignity and autonomy. Referring to the spiritual practice of waiting to be called on, (rather than jumping in to share when the mood strikes), she said that she has occasionally felt moved to speak in open meetings where the chair doesn't call on members, but went on to say,

"But the trouble is, sometimes—that just leads to too much thinking for me, 'cause I sat there thinking, I think I know that I have something to say, but is it worthwhile? Should I just let them talk? It was just, thinking about me the whole time! And I couldn't really listen! I got into too much thinking about self." (Line 705)

While this could be interpreted as an instance where a woman with a history of abuse once more conformed to male expectations, it might be more accurately interpreted as a demonstration of agency and flexibility, in which she adapted and personalized available recovery metaphors and practices and made them her own. Her willingness to challenge and diverge from the instructions and suggestions she was taught in early recovery show an evolving sense of agency, and a willingness to hold opposing opinions rather than simply conforming or being obedient.

Softening judgment versus learning to judge. White refers again to characteristically male defenses of grandiosity, hyper-criticalness, black and white

thinking and resentfulness. He suggests that AA meditations such as “easy does it” and “let it go” can be seen as antidotes for this defensive posture. While these points are well-taken, this metaphorical distinction gets problematic with the introduction of projection of blame and intellectualization – the assumption being that male alcoholics think too much, whereas female addicts are more likely to adopt strategies of and habits of passivity and self-blame. “The shame-based indictment of the alcoholic woman creates an existential position within which she has no right to judge others, in which she is incapable of thinking and judging, in which she is not worthy of judging others.” (White and Chaney, p. 23) While this distinction looks good on paper and makes theoretical sense, it was not well supported in the current study. It is true that all five participants shared stories that called attention to the importance of gaining a sense of autonomy and agency, but most of them also demonstrated themselves to be prone to intellectualization and overthinking things. White and Chaney’s question about whether AA’s anti-intellectual orientation might be particularly damaging for women, and should be replaced with an emphasis on encouraging critical thinking skills and confidence in those skills (as well as asserting opinions verbally) is a good one, but did not come across as salient in this sample. In fact, all five participants demonstrated a propensity for intellectualization, and talked about ways that AA helped them manage what they interpreted as a problematic tendency effectively.

This is a case where the distinction between characteristically male versus characteristically female metaphors is less useful than the articulation of a spectrum. It seems clear that for some people in recovery, learning to judge and differentiate is at least

as important as softening judgment. There is also a further complicating factor, since White and Chaney make an important point by articulating a valid perspective for recovery that welcomes self-assertion and critical thinking. But they neglect another aspect when they fail to acknowledge a potential double-bind for women who are critical thinkers, but are silenced in AA by pressure to “keep it simple,” in the sense that their silencing is not in the service of valuable ego-deflation, but repeats the cultural disempowerment mentioned in earlier sections. For these women then, a balance of adaptation and self-assertion must be achieved and repeatedly renegotiated in order for appropriation of recovery to occur.

Achieving silence versus breaking silence. This distinction showed up in the current study, and is closely related to the theme of autonomy. We live in a culture where “women cultivate their capacities for listening while encouraging men to speak.” (White and Chaney, p. 24) Participant five voiced a resonant, common experience for women when she said, “So anyway, I grew up and um, was terrified of boys. Found this boy in high school who liked me because I was a good listener. I figured out if you could listen to people they wouldn’t ask you about yourself and I’m a good listener.” (Line 85) Metaphors of silence are rich, and an accurate imagery of silence and its meanings must take into account that silence has profoundly different meanings for men and women historically and culturally. Historically, assertive, confident women have often been shamed in media images, referred to by derogatory terms and deemed less attractive than more characteristically feminine women who adopt a diminutive or retiring posture. Cultural stereotypes that encourage shame about being a bitch, talking too much, or

demanding attention are certainly relevant to meetings and AA structure, yet it is important to note that three participants explicitly referenced a lack of shaming around speaking up in AA. Participant five, referring to her early years in AA when she was often the only woman at the meeting said,

“...she takes me into this meeting and these men look at me and say, Al-Anon is in the next room, cause I’m young. And I looked at them and I thought, you have no idea who I am, I’m going to prove you wrong! Because that was my theory, I’m going to prove you wrong! I’m a coward but I’m a feisty coward.” (413) Later she added, “those men were like father figures that I’d never had. They were loving and kind and tolerant and they didn’t judge me. And through all of my insanity, they kept saying, keep coming back.” (Line 394)

Participant one also dismissed any notion that she suffered undue hardship as one of the only women in her AA circle for many years:

“Well, I would guess until the beginning of the 80’s for at least five years [I was the only woman]. And the old guys used to really razz me. Because here I was, 31, I was short and I was cute, and they said I spilled more than you could drink, and I said well good, I’m glad you did! Because it got you here and I’m glad that you’re here. You know? And for years, as long as I was an area officer, when I got up to speak at the podium at the area, they would shout, stand up, stand up we can’t see you! And I would say, that’s ok you don’t have to see me, can you hear me? Because they never had any problems hearing me, so, as long as you can hear me that’s ok, you don’t have to see me. As long as I was the area chair person I had a foot stool I’d stand up on. And I had a barstool I’d sit up on so I was even with the mic, and when I went to stand up I had the foot stool I’d stand up on. Because as chairperson you really need control of the floor.” (Line 205)

It is noteworthy that, although both of these women share the experience of being teased, or targeted (in a non-malicious way) simply by virtue of their gender (and age and stature), they also display a tenacity that allows them to navigate that traditionally male sphere without being trampled or devalued by it. Certainly, some women and members of disenfranchised populations might find this more difficult. Also, to assume that the relatively outspoken women in the current study are representative of all or most women

would be faulty reasoning. There are socioeconomic factors, questions of intelligence, upbringing and education (to name just a few) that come into play when considering the ability or tendency an individual has to speak up for herself. Based on this study, White and Chaney's suggestion that breaking silence may be more important for many women, particularly survivors of abuse, is an important one.

Another aspect of the issues of breaking silence as a beneficial activity also raises issues of alcohol as a solution. Participants two and three spoke about their alcoholism in terms that acknowledged what alcohol did for them, how it functioned to address a problem. It makes sense to wonder whether alcohol might serve different purposes for men and women who find a solution in it. For example, participant three said she found her emotional experience and her voice when she was drunk, and expressed her sense that developing an emotional life and emotional language without alcohol has been one of the most challenging parts of recovery for her

“So, it's just like, that process has been really hard for me, I think, the emotional—the emotional thing. Because sometimes I feel like I want to be emotional at some things and can't, because I'm so used to just closing it in, and I feel really, uh, I feel like I never get that release. And alcohol did that for me. I would get really angry, or sad, or just frustrated or whatever, and then my thing was, I'd grab a drink! You know, and I'd get through it, I'd cry over it, I'd throw stuff or break things, or just do whatever, or get crazy, you know. Just let it all out.” (Line 238)

Where participant three sought release and expression, participant two sought relief from unresolved trauma. It makes sense to conclude that people must drink for any number of reasons, and indeed, there is some evidence that women are more likely to drink around an event, where men have a greater risk of genetic alcoholism (White and

Chaney, p. 6). It follows that effective treatment for women should address and attempt to resolve the event, reason, or organizing trauma around which a woman drinks.

In addition to cultural valuing of silence, double standards exist around breaking silence for addicted mothers. “Silence is the existential position from which most addicted women begin” (White and Chaney, p. 25). Again, the phrase, *take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth*, comes to mind, along with the sense that it might have very different connotations for a man or a woman. Addicted women “break silence” with each other to achieve connection, which seems to literally save their lives. Participant three seemed as though she couldn’t say enough about the value of her female relationships which are built on trust and sharing:

“And so that’s also been another amazing difference of like, I’m going through something and I don’t know how to get through it and it’s frustrating, and the first person I think of calling is my sponsor, a woman in the program who’s not gonna judge me for whatever it is, how silly it might be or whatever. And like, sharing that experience with me.” (Line 620)

“Discovery of voice,” (White and Chaney, p. 25) shows up in all five narratives as a shift from obedience to autonomy and accountability. This might be seen as a tension between mainstream AA’s emphasis on honesty and accountability, and the idea that humility and silence are a primary goal, when that doesn’t always add up for women.

These findings support White and Chaney’s assertion that,

“When silence is first broken, the newly discovered voice—this reborn self—is very fragile and must be nurtured until it gains strength. It is often in the chemistry of mutual support between recovering women that this rebirth of self occurs. Discovering and externalizing these inner voices is generating women’s language, women’s metaphors and women’s stories. It is feminizing the culture of recovery throughout the United States.” (p. 25)

This also resonates with the overwhelming focus on connection and female intimacy that came across in all five narratives.

White and Chaney make an important point when they remind us that the goal is not to celebrate one metaphor and dismiss the other, but rather to complicate recovery imagery and provide metaphors that help unravel the threads of addiction.

“These distinctions suggest that the experiential pathways of recovery for addicted men and women can be quite divergent. Her silence and his grandiose and aggressive speech both anchor addiction. Where he must learn to walk softly on the earth without scarring it, she must learn to leave a footprint. Where he must discover silence, she must break silence.” (p. 25)

Service to others versus acts of self-care is the tenth metaphorical distinction proposed in *Metaphors of Transformation*. White and Chaney contextualize these metaphors culturally, and suggest that service makes sense as a corrective or an antidote for the traditional cultural suppression of compassion and care in men (p. 13) and becomes a vehicle for connecting emotionally with others and resolving guilt. Cultural pressures for women, on the other hand, encourage service, domesticity, and accommodation. The same traits that are suppressed in men are encouraged to the extreme in women. Not only that, but women are criticized for embodying those traits of assertiveness and self-centeredness that have historically been adaptive for men. For men who have been enculturated in this traditional way, the experience of doing service work is likely to offer a new experience of self, promote self-reflection and revelation. Whereas, “Programs that emphasize service as an early stage recovery task reinforce the culturally programmed value of self-sacrifice for women” (p. 26). These arguments are supported in the current study, the findings of which suggest that in general, women’s

recovery might emphasize mutuality rather than service or self-sacrifice, especially in the interest of creating a different self-experience. Metaphors of service to others versus acts of self-care are especially resonant with themes of parenting; education; and sponsorship. Participant five spoke extensively about her struggles to find time for herself and for her program, while still trying to maintain a certain standard of involvement and care as a mother:

“And about five years into sobriety my baby goes to school and I’m devastated. Because by now, I’m baking all my bread from scratch, I’ve taught myself how to cook and can, and I can everything all the way from the beginning of apricot season all the way through tomatoes. I canned all summer. And stored up stuff. I was really becoming quite a good homemaker. And I was sponsoring women.” (Line 423)

While it is evident from her story that participant five enjoyed aspects of motherhood, it is also clear that her propensity for taking care of others and sacrificing her own needs has been a defining feature of her life. In fact, after her children were all in school, participant five returned to school and began a career counseling children. Self-sacrifice might be seen as a value and an organizing principle in her life. So while service in AA might be valuable for her, it is unlikely to be the radical experience that it would be for male AA members who have been encouraged to rely on the services of women like her. White and Chaney go further when they say, “For an alcohol and drug dependent woman to experience service as a sacrificial flight from self is not progress, but regression in the self-refutation of the legitimacy of her own needs, and ultimately her own existence” (p. 27). While this idea proposes a useful continuum from “narcissistic preoccupation with self” to “self-flight through sacrificial fusion with another”, it also colludes with a problematic pathologizing of caretaking behavior. It should be noted that White and

Chaney begin to address this point in the following section when they critique popular culture notions about codependency. Regardless, this is an area which calls for further investigation, since it seems possible that female experience has been reformed and remolded through male language.

Dependency versus autonomy: Codependency – A cultural double-bind for women. This distinction is interesting in the sense that it complicates the idea of dependency as a negative experience. It also resonates with themes from the current study including autonomy and female intimacy. White and Chaney propose three ways of viewing women's propensity for connection: idealize it, balance it with valuing of achievement and independence, or pathologize it (p. 28). Within this framework, it is arguable that mainstream AA has a tendency to pathologize dependence, which like self-sacrifice and caretaking (as pointed out in the previous section) may not always be problematic. This metaphorical distinction draws attention to the problematic tendency to turn environmental problems into personal psychopathology and attempt to treat them with a one-size-fits-all approach. This showed up in the language of participants who pathologized and were critical of their own helping and care-taking behaviors. Participant five illustrates this conundrum with the following quote characterizing her caretaking behaviors.

“I was so afraid of hurting people and such a people-pleaser—I’m kind of a barometer, I walk in a room and I sponge up the feeling to this day, unfortunately, and I can sense who’s unhappy and my role from childhood is I want to help you, I want to make it better, I want to make you feel ok so I can breathe. That’s the part I’ve learned about me. If I help you, then I can take a deep breath because you’re ok. Part of my ism, my perceptions are wrong.” (Line 194)

The significance of the above quote stands out when we take into consideration her history of abuse, her violent alcoholic father and the following way that she describes how she came to be married to her husband: “And we went out to coffee about five times and I could tell he liked me. And we would drink, and we had a great old time. But he was just a guy who was not going to put his hands around my throat.” (Line 179) In light of her history, the helping tendencies she pathologizes and critiques in herself appear adaptive and resourceful. One intention of the current study is to validate and flesh out the experience of women in recovery in their own language, but there are areas where it is very difficult to tell whether women are speaking directly to their own experience, or are using the language and imagery they are conditioned to use. This is one of those areas. Participant two also talked about caretaking as a strategy and a life orientation. She made broad generalizations about caretakers dominating the nursing industry, and there is a sense in which her attitude toward caretaking is less critical. She acknowledges a resourceful, compassionate aspect of helping behaviors. Referring to a conversation she had with a fellow nurse:

“I think [nurses] are trying to fix what we couldn’t fix back then. And I thought, you know nurses are definitely fixers. And then the next thought I had was, no wonder it’s so crazy to work with nurses because it’s a bunch of untreated Al-Anons is what’s going on. So everybody is a control freak, nobody will let go, everybody’s running on fear that it’s not gonna be ok so they have to be in control. And that caretaking comes out of fear, you know, it’s not so much out of the goodness of my heart that I want to give to you, which I think we feel—I mean, I definitely feel that, it’s why I went into nursing. But also I think it’s an attempt to try to fix something.” (Line 474)

Here we might consider the commonly accepted idea that a woman who exhibits caretaking behavior really needs others to be ok for her own sense of well-being, so she is

in actuality, being narcissistic and self-serving in her caretaking efforts. Based on the current study, women have a variety of reasons for taking care of others, some of them are highly adaptive, and some may be less so or benefit from modification. But these reasons and the accompanying implications for gender-specific treatment cannot be understood from a traditional, male-based framework which perceives caretaking behavior as essentially feminine.

Blindness to safety versus sensitivity to physical/psychological safety. White and Chaney suggest that issues of safety are neglected in male-based recovery models (p. 6). This is an important idea, and the significance of safety issues both showed up in themes of trust; violent background/abusive relationships; trust. As a starting point, it is relevant to note that all five participants either focused on, or at least mentioned having a violent, controlling background. One participant spoke extensively of her violent, alcoholic father. Two participants described abusive romantic partners. The two remaining participants focused primarily on their recovery, but alluded to violent and controlling past relationships. While issues around trust and vigilance were present, it is notable that issues of safety were also absent in important ways. Two participants spoke directly to the potential for victimization in AA. For example, participant three's comments about a male AA member she connected with early on illustrate her sense of vigilance and danger: "And that's sort of a pattern of mine, you know, to follow around the protector, you know, somebody that could like, protect me." (Line 132) And yet, neither participant three or any of the other interviewees shared any negative experiences with men during their time in AA. Many of the excerpts shared in other sections of this paper illustrate an

overwhelming sense of safety and trust in male AA members. Even when sex was an issue, it appears not to have been re-traumatizing or stressful. Participant four had the following to say about her sexual experiences in early recovery as a very young woman in a small community:

“...it took time, and some of them did take advantage of that. You know, I will never knock the thirteenth stepping that went on, you’ll never hear me knock that because I firmly believe it was part of what kept me sober. Some of those men taking advantage—all though they were taking advantage, although they were sleeping with me, we were still talking about the big book. They were still modeling sober. We’re doing stuff sober, you know.” (Line 38)

While the five participants interviewed in this study reported no traumatizing experiences around sex or safety in AA, there are certainly women who have had less positive experiences (Flaherty et al, 2014). Addicted women are more likely than others to have been victimized, and women are generally more likely than men to be preoccupied with issues of safety, particularly when they are seriously outnumbered. The issue is complicated by toxic relationships with men who may have no understanding of sobriety or may be comfortable with the status quo, and resist their wives or partners efforts to get sober since it means change. This can be even more of an obstacle to the woman’s sobriety if she is financially reliant on the man, if he is overtly abusive and controlling, or if there are children involved (see section on divided attention above).

“Effective treatment of addicted women is also extremely sensitive to how women’s psychological safety has often been violated within traditional treatment models. When women fail to respond to treatment in the male-defined vision of progress, they are often defined as resistant and further shamed and stigmatized through labeling or intensified verbal confrontation (White and Chaney, p. 31)”

If women speak up about issues of safety, or select meetings in order to avoid men they feel targeted by, or question the suggestions of male AA members, they may be accused

of resistance. On the other hand, they can be accused of being people-pleasers if they are too accommodating. White and Chaney make the important point that traumas in the history of a woman are likely to be experiential processes, not isolated events, and must be treated as such, taking into account trust-building and psychological safety (p. 31), which is often neglected in a traditional AA approach that emphasizes linearity, logical progression and prioritizing of step work in a prescribed fashion (see *breaking silence* section, above).

While concerns regarding safety and sexual trauma and victimization are important and relevant to the current study, it would be inaccurate to overstate them since none of the five participants reported feeling victimized or unsafe at AA meetings. Based on this research then, sex per se is not damaging to women in recovery, even very early in recovery, when there is joint consent and safety and sobriety are prioritized.

Blindness to image versus sensitivity to body image. This is another area where AA has historically set aside issues that are central for women in favor of a linear, simple program. In fact, potential for self-esteem and body image issues to trigger profound emotional distress and subsequent relapse suggests that these issues be set aside while the primary addiction is addressed, very dangerous. It might be argued that issues of body image are becoming as important for some men as they have long been for women, but this still points to a necessity for flexible, individualized treatment that takes into consideration all the many aspects of addiction and relapse. Participant three spoke movingly about finding physical attractiveness as a solution for living:

“I still didn’t make friends, and was still like, the oddball, and you know, it was just very, um, like very introverted, actually. Spent a lot of lunches by myself just walking

the halls. And then high school came along and at that point I was just tired of not being seen, tired of not um, feeling like I was noticed at all. And like, over the summer I had sort of blossomed and, totally different person. And that's when I figured out that, oh—when you wear makeup and do your hair and all that stuff, like, you get attention. You know? So that was sort of the beginning of realizing that you know, F the girls, they don't want to be my friend, obviously. And dudes don't care! They don't care if my parents are white, they don't care, you know, they just accept me for wanting to get in my pants, you know? So I was like, well, that's better than nothing. At least I'll have somebody to walk the halls with. You know, not just myself.” (Line 359)

As illustrated in the above quote, there are many women for whom experiences like these make it virtually impossible to separate issues of identity, intimacy and hope from issues of sobriety. Certainly neglecting these issues has the potential to derail efforts at sobriety. White and Chaney suggest that we need to attend to how the beauty myth is affecting women and treat eating disorders alongside addiction, rather than prioritizing one if they are both present (p. 33). It follows that more attention should also be given to the interaction between use of substances and self esteem, particularly as it relates to the interaction between sexual behaviors, sexual risk taking and substance abuse.

The metaphors of time and timing. White and Chaney suggest that being in the present is a cornerstone for recovery for men and women (p. 8), but encourage the reader to consider differences in sense of timing and duration of recovery activities and events. White outlines arguments suggesting that early recovery is too fragile to address family of origin issues or traumas, which is problematic and dangerous for women who were sexually abused as children (see *guilt vs. shame* and *breaking silence* sections, above. The importance of addressing and treating trauma has already been discussed, but this section highlights the importance of addressing it early in recovery, particularly with women for whom self-medication appears to be a prominent aspect of substance abuse. “Finding no

vehicle for drug-free catharsis, many such clients respond with flight from treatment and a return to self-medication” (White and Chaney, p. 35).

Regarding the duration of recovery activities, we might wonder whether this should be considered in context of the significant value of individuation for many women. In this light, and in certain cases, decreased involvement in AA, and/or diminishing need for meetings might be interpreted as a reflection of successful individuation rather than a precursor to relapse. This theory, however, was not reflected in the findings of the current study since all five participants remained active in AA at the time of interview.

Recovery versus discovery. This metaphorical distinction is reminiscent of the above discussion of hitting bottom vs. finding hope, and is relevant to the theme of autonomy that was prominent in all five interviews. The very concept of recovery or rehabilitation becomes problematic for people who have rarely experienced agency, empowerment, or success since one cannot retrieve something she never had. White and Chaney suggestion that for women, recovery may be, “more self-creation than self-retrieval.” In a certain sense, this might be seen as a semantic argument, but language that emphasizes self-discovery may feel more empowering to women, and in fact Women For Sobriety emphasizes this type of language, apparently to good effect (White and Chaney, p. 36). Regardless of semantics, this theme was prominent in the current study, particularly in the narratives of participants three and four who conveyed a sense of coming to life in AA and discovering aspects of themselves and of life which had not been lost through alcoholism, but were radically new. Participant three spoke movingly

about learning that women could be friends, and coming to believe in love where before she never had. Participant four shared about being called a “lady” for the first time, learning how to grocery shop and take care of herself, and imagining that she had something to offer.

The dominator model versus the partnership model. This metaphorical distinction is very relevant to the current study, and relates particularly to themes of sponsorship, rejections of AA hierarchy, learning from women, and female intimacy. White points out that male relationships formed the foundation for modern addiction counseling relationships and sponsorship (White and Chaney, p. 26). These relationships tend to emphasize skillful confrontations with the male ego in an attempt to give the defensive male relief from his ego. “Success,” in this context, means giving up power struggle. Participants in the current study shared stories that illustrated a sense that for them, meaningful relationships with mentors, sponsors and friends, followed more of a partnership model. White and Chaney suggest that partnership values client/helpee strengths over counselor/helper expertise, and this was reflected in all five interviews. Participant three highlights the reciprocal quality of her relationships and a sense of mutual discovery (rather than simple transmission of information) with friends, mentors, sponsors and sponsees when she says, “So um, yeah, it’s just it’s amazing to um, just have those experiences with the ladies that are in my life now, that teach me stuff. Like I never thought that I could be taught things by women.” (Line 613)

It should be noted that four participants specifically addressed struggles with the structure of sponsorship, and ways they had emphasized accountability over authority

(see power great than vs power within the self, section, above). But even participant four, who emphasized transmission of knowledge in the form of book work, directly challenged the concept of hierarchy and sponsorship, espousing a mentorship model and refusing to label the people she works with as sponsees.

An escape from dualism. In this final section, White and Chaney include a last metaphor that draws attention to the tension between the value and truth that may be revealed by using a male/female dichotomy as a pedagogical tool, and the potential for creating or reinforcing false dichotomies. They acknowledge that,

“The human potential of both women and men have been shackled through unidimensional enculturation. Such potential may be discovered by accessing those specific dimensions of character that have been suppressed. The reason men and women’s treatment needs to be different is that the parts of the self each must reclaim are fundamentally different. The goal of this reclamation is wholeness.” (p. 40).

This sentiment has been supported throughout the present discussion, which includes repeated references to areas where the metaphorical spectrum proposed has significant value independent of the validity of associating one or the other end of the spectrum with the experience of men or women, generally. White and Chaney’s suggestion that wholeness of experience and expression is the goal also parallels a sentiment emphasized by participants one, four, and two, that women’s meetings might have a time and a place, but that ideally one finds herself in the larger AA community. Participant one expresses it beautifully when she has the following to say about women’s meetings:

“That value is for women who think like, I don’t think of myself as a woman, I think of myself as a human being. But for women who think of themselves as women, and who have maybe, sexual abuse problems or something that makes them hesitate to go from a woman into being a human being, those meetings are

valuable for them. And I think eventually, the ones who are growing will fly out to the fellowship.” (Line 945)

To summarize, the current study has attempted to identify some ways in which women approach and experience recovery in AA distinctly from men. Findings from the current study agree with the basic premise of White and Chaney’s *Metaphors of Transformation*, yet further accentuate the problematic nature of speaking in gendered, dualistic terms about the experiences of female recovering alcoholics. Both White and Chaney, and the findings of the current study point to the value of broadening our expectations for recovering alcoholics and addicts of any gender, and supporting recovering individuals in finding language and customizing strategies and tools to meet their needs in ways that account for and address differences of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and culture. While it is important to challenge habitually dualistic assumptions and language, there is a circularity to these arguments, since it would not be accurate or effective to do away with gendered language all together. Instead, a goal might be to hold the tension and reconcile ourselves to the messiness of experience. Since if we deny the legitimacy of the experience of women who find that AA does not address their experience (Jean Kirkpatrick and others who gravitate toward Women for Sobriety, for example) then we are participating in the oppression of women for whom that experience resonates. At the same time, as expressed by the women in the current study, we cannot attribute the experience of oppression or silencing to all women in AA.

Specifically, the current study supports and fleshes out several key themes from *Metaphors of Transformation* which can be applied to gender-specific treatment methods. First, the current study supports a distinction between empowerment and

disempowerment and the careful application of strategies that are designed to promote a sense of humility, since women are disempowered relative to men before they become alcoholics, and are profoundly disempowered by the time they seek help for their addiction. Promoting empowerment in these women, fostering hope and encouraging them in gaining a sense of agency will be more effective than emphasizing powerlessness which can repeat cultural and social traumas, and result in hopelessness and giving up. All five participants in the current study shared experiences when they began to perceive themselves as agents in their own lives, and these experiences were then interpreted as pivotal moments on their respective roads to recovery.

In light of the different meaning that powerlessness has for men and women, themes of acceptance and surrender also require thoughtful and individualized application. Where men in AA have long benefitted from adopting a stance of humility and acceptance, no longer fighting circumstances and authorities, the women in the current study shared stories which highlight the importance of accepting certain aspects of reality without surrendering to an outside force or power, since being at the mercy of external forces was a problematic part of their history. The difference between guilt and shame, and cultural factors which lead women to suffer from chronic shame are also relevant, and White and Chaney's comments regarding twelve-step amends as an antidote for guilt but not shame, came through in the current study as well. Rather than focusing on ninth step amends (e.g., paying back the money) all five women emphasized new ways of living and interacting that contributed to an increasing sense of competence and self-esteem, and gradual relief of shame.

Finally, the centrality of relationship in all five narratives of the current study, and the profoundly healing quality of corrective attachment experiences must be noted. All five participants told stories of recovery that centered around new and unexpected experiences of intimacy, love and reciprocity. Based on the current study, addiction can be seen as a disease of isolation, where connection is the cure.

Limitations

Being a qualitative study, the current project focused on quality and nuance and deemphasized generalizable themes. While it might be argued that size of sample is a limitation in most if not all qualitative studies, it could also be said that qualitative analysis is at it's best when applied to groundbreaking research, when the momentum of the mainstream has left certain voices without a platform. This is the case with the current study. Research into addicted and substance abusing women is an opportunity to observe many ingrained habitual, sexist attitudes and practices that have been sufficiently smoothed over or amended in mainstream society as to warrant little attention on a day to day basis (not that irregularities and prejudices are not present). At the same time, the small sample size inevitably creates a 'population' that is not representative of society or culture or any real moment in time. It might be suggested that the hetero, cisgender orientation of all five participants of the current study constitutes a weakness, yet by virtue of being a study of women's issues in recovery, this study already situates itself as being an answer to, rather than in opposition of, those demands for equal representation. Essentially, the experience of women is the question at hand, and the various orientations of those women ought not be questioned. Further research into the recovery experience of

transgender, lesbian and gay populations, as well as other under or mis-identified populations who attempt to access twelve step programs and other mutual aid societies, is warranted. Additionally, literature suggests that many women in recovery have been subjected to abuse, harassment, and stalking in recovery. The overwhelmingly positive sentiment toward men and men in recovery conveyed by the five participants of the current study must be respected as legitimate, yet the experiences of those women who have had different, less favorable experiences within the fellowship of AA should also be examined and taken more seriously than they have at times in the past.

Conclusion

My research question is meant to add to a growing body of literature acknowledging the diverse experiences and challenges among recovering alcoholics, and calling for treatment modalities and philosophies that are appropriately adaptive. Toward this end, there is a trend toward complicating the identity and the experience of “the alcoholic,” and diversifying the concept of treatment. Consistent with this trend, it is only logical to ask women in recovery about their lived experience so as to identify those nuances unique to facilitating their recovery.

Results from the current study indicate that there is a recognizable, relatable structure of recovery, but also that cultural and philosophical differences color ones expectations of recovery as much as they color expectations for life. Questions about how women experience drug and alcohol treatment are as important (and as neglected) as questions about how women experience heart disease and subsequent treatment. Further

research can help to make connections and tie together themes identified in this study and others.

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DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Qualitative Study

INVESTIGATOR: Ariel Larson, M.A.

ADVISOR: (if applicable:) Dr. Russell Walsh
Duquesne University
Psychology Clinic
900 Rockwell Hall

Advisor's Phone Number (412) 396-6562

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the lived experience of women in alcoholics anonymous. You will allow me to interview you one-on-one about your experiences. Individual interviews will take place face to face and will last approximately ninety minutes. By signing this consent you also agree to attend a follow-up focus group meeting including yourself and four other participants. This interview will take no longer than 90 minutes. All interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed for research purposes. Interviews will be conducted in a

private, reserved room at a local library, or you may request to have your individual interview at your home.

By signing this consent you are indicating that you meet the following criteria: you are at least eighteen years of age, you have been sober in Alcoholics Anonymous for at least three years during which time you have attended meetings regularly, and you are not currently being treated for a co-occurring disorder

Transcribed data gathered from this study may be presented at professional conferences and/or published in academic journals. Audio recordings and transcripts will only be available to the researcher and advisor.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

Participants may feel some discomfort talking about their experience in recovery, but overall there are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life. While measures will be taken to protect your anonymity there is a small possibility that your participation in the focus group with four other women will allow you to be identified. Your participation in the study will benefit women in recovery and the larger recovery community.

COMPENSATION:

Participants will not be compensated. However, you may request reimbursement for the cost of traveling to the site of the interview/s.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. No identity will be made in the data analysis. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's home. All materials will be

destroyed within four years of completion of the research.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Ariel Larson at (206) 850-0911 and Dr. Linda Goodfellow, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board at (412) 396-6326.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Research Study

This is a qualitative research study that will explore the experiences of women who have achieved sustained sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Who is Eligible?

Women with at least 3 years of continuous sobriety who:

- Attend AA meetings regularly
- Are at least 18 years of age
- Have worked the 12 steps with a sponsor

What will you be asked to do?

- Share your experience during an individual interview
- Attend a focus group with several other women in AA
- Time commitment of no more than 3 hours total

Please call Ariel at (206) 850-0911 for more information

Duquesne University, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania

Appendix C - Participant 1

1 R1: So, I don't have a lot of questions. Its really straightforward. I want to hear about
2 your experience getting sober as a woman in AA. Please talk about your experience in
3 Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience of working the twelve steps with your
4 sponsor. Feel free to share anything that comes to mind that you think will help me
5 understand what it has been like for you to get sober as a woman in AA.

6 S1: OK, so you want me to start with my sobriety?

7 R2: If that—sure.

8 P2: I was 31 years old and I only drank for about 6 years. But I was a late stage chronic
9 alcoholic. Which-they didn't have all those titles when I sobered up. I had deadened all
10 the nerves in my legs from my toes up to my knees. And um, I had no intention of
11 sobering up. Um, but I had a spiritual experience. And it got my attention. And then
12 somewhere along the way, somebody had given me a schedule. So I walked around with
13 that schedule for three days, and I finally called AA for help. I lived in B-, W- at the time
14 and there was a phone number for the B-group, and I called that number and there was a
15 gentleman named E- who answered the phone. And what I found out later was, there's no
16 B- group. There had been a B- group, but in December somebody had gotten drunk,
17 somebody had moved – there were only three of them – somebody had gotten drunk
18 somebody had moved and E- took the coffee pot and went home. And it was his number
19 that was in the directory. So it was just kinda like, um, like it was supposed to happen
20 that way. So I called him, and I didn't know anything about alcoholics anonymous, I
21 called him and I said I needed help with alcohol and he read me the twelve steps and
22 when we got done with it he said, you got anything to bitch about that? (laughter) I said
23 no sir! Whatever he could have said I would have gone along with it because I knew that
24 would be my only help because I was dying. And um, he said well, ok, stay sober until
25 Saturday and I'll take you to a meeting. So I had six days of sobriety, not drinking, I
26 wouldn't call them sober exactly at home. So I'm one of the few anymore who can tell
27 you how terrible it is to detox without medical help. And it was a nightmare, but I didn't
28 drink, I stayed sober and Saturday night this guy showed up and he always wore blue
29 jeans with big red suspender and a baseball hat and I knew this guy for fifty years and I
30 only saw him once that he didn't have that outfit on. And um, uh, he used to call himself

Appendix C - Participant 1

31 a Pollock farmer. He was very proud of being a Pollock. He was the kind of guy you just
32 don't mess around with. So, he took me to my first meeting and the only thing – there's
33 two people in town here that are sober still that were at my first meeting. And so, that was
34 in January, 1975 and in April, they started meeting in F-, they're no longer meeting, but
35 then I could go to two meetings a week. Then in June E- and I started the B- international
36 group. And that's got about four or five meetings a week now and it's a big meeting, but
37 we were there for about three weeks and this was my first real introduction to service.
38 Um, we didn't have a name for the group, the third member that came in was G- from W-
39 , we figured if we called it an international group then maybe people would come over
40 from Canada! And um, so E- said to me, I could put out the literature, that was my job,
41 and I put it out and I organized in neat piles because I'm a past librarian, I had to organize
42 it some way, and he made the coffee. And then after a month he said, okay now it's time
43 to rotate. And he showed me how to make the coffee and next week, you do the coffee
44 and I'll do the literature. So the next week I made the coffee and he waited until I got
45 done with the coffee and he had the literature all in a big brown sack and he dumped the
46 sack and he went like this to spread it all around and he says, that's the spiritual value of
47 rotation is you can't tell someone else how to do the job. So I learned that within six
48 months of my sobriety. Um, the other thing I learned was, there were two other things in
49 my early sobriety, the first one was, he would take me to these meetings he'd tell me
50 what day he was gonna pick me up, it was Saturdays and Wednesdays and every once in
51 a while there'd be another day and he took me to these meetings and we came back
52 home, and he took me to these meetings and we came back home, and he never said
53 anything to me, I had to ask all the questions. He never told me anything about AA or
54 about himself unless I asked. And so one the way home from one of those meetings I
55 said, E-, you took me to two meetings tonight what was the first one where everybody
56 was yelling at each other? And he said, well that's the district committee meeting. So I
57 learned about the district you know, when I had less than 90 days sober. And um, the lady
58 I call my service sponsor, she used to call me every day, she worked at the phone
59 company, and at that time she was the area secretary. And now, when I talk about he area
60 I'm talking about the old Washington area. It was the whole state of W- half of Idaho, it

Appendix C - Participant 1

61 was 300 miles up above Spokane and we really traveled. I mean, these people now who
62 talk about the West Coast area, they think they have so much area so big, so many
63 people, they have no idea. Um, so she found out I could type, so she started giving me
64 things to type. Cause she was area secretary, but she didn't know how to type. And they
65 also had me typing for Angus Lamont, who was in charge of the High and Dry down at
66 Seattle, and I used to say, what is GSR, what is DCM, you know cause they had all these
67 initials and I didn't know what they were and I wanted to get it right. So um, uh I got
68 involved in that. I didn't get asked to be involved in it, I just was encompassed in it. The
69 thing I like to tell about, is that when I sobered up I didn't have any money and I lived in
70 a really, really controlling environment. So, after one or two meetings I asked E- what the
71 big book was because I thought it was the bible. And after I'd been sober for a while and
72 listened to him, I kind of knew it wasn't the bible but I didn't know what it was. And so
73 they talked to me about, there was this book called Alcoholics Anonymous. And because
74 I didn't have enough money to buy it I made an arrangement with the treasurer to pay a
75 quarter a week. And when I got my 90th sobriety date, 90 days, they gave me my big
76 book. And it says in the front of it, To Mary M from the F- Unity group, March 20th,
77 1975. And I had ten years of sobriety before I realized, I hadn't paid enough quarters to
78 buy the book. And they just acted like, you bought it now, here it is. But the thing that
79 was so potent about that was, I took it home and I read it all the way through that night. I
80 was so desperate for sobriety, and what were they doing, and how to put it together and—
81 R3: At ninety days, you knew there was something you wanted besides not drinking?
82 P3: When I walked into that first meeting I knew these folks—I knew these were spiritual
83 folks for me. Because they talked about alcohol like I thought about it. But I never would
84 have talked about it like that. See, right away I knew we were kinship, but I didn't know
85 the path they were following until I got that big book. And um, I never thought that was
86 sad, until one time I told my story and my brother was there, and it just hit me how
87 pathetic that was that at 90 days, not knowing how much my quarters were worth, and I
88 so desperate I would read that book overnight. And I cried when I told my story, and my
89 brother and I got in the car afterwards and I said, I've never cried when I told my story
90 and that was the first time I cried. And he reached over and patted my knee and said,

Appendix C - Participant 1

91 that's ok, I cried too. So, they got me involved and um, I was in service for quite a few
92 years. I was the first W- area archivist. And um, and I always tell people, be the first! If
93 you get a chance to be the first, be the first, because you can decide how the job's done.
94 Because there's nobody been out there doing it. And I was only archivist for a year
95 because I was appointed in a non-election year for group officers, and when elections
96 came around they elected me to be their GSR. So I thought it was really better for me to
97 go back and start from the beginning, rather than stay an area officer for another year. So
98 then I was a GSR and—

99 R4: And this was at, how long were you sober when you became the archivist?

100 P4: Uh...probably about a year, a year and a quarter.

101 R5: Still early...

102 P5: Really, really early. And Terry, my service sponsor is the one that pushed me into it.
103 And I think I got accepted because I was the only one who put my name in for it. Because
104 nobody knew what archives were. You know, and nobody wanted to take that
105 responsibility and I was just stupid enough—I had worked in Quaker archives in the
106 Midwest before I came out here. I had worked in Quaker archives and I'd worked at the
107 B- library for four or five years. And so um, I did the archives. And the main thing I did
108 with the archives was, I'd have pictures from GSO and I'd take them around and show
109 people. I took them into Monroe Reformatory and um, just inform people about the early
110 history and we can start an archives here in district eleven, and we're gonna start with
111 these picture. And um, now the area archives is huge. Just huge. So I was archivist, I was
112 GSR, I was DCM, and then I was area treasurer. And I was area chairperson and then I
113 was area alternate delegate. So I guess that was about 14 years there, that was um, almost
114 a part time job doing all that kinds of service. And I loved it, I loved the travel, I loved
115 meeting the different people. I loved hearing different stories and it really through me
116 into the traditions and the concepts fairly early in sobriety, and most people don't even
117 think about the concepts until they have a few years sober. I've met people who have 15
118 years sobriety that don't know we have concepts. Um, and that's kind of one of the things
119 I do in this area right now, is that last summer I led a group of women to read the
120 concepts. I participated in a year and two months study on the service manual from

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121 beginning to end, with A- and the Fairhaven group. And um, so I like to help people
122 enlarge their program of recovery. Because I really think, you know, if you don't have
123 the service and the concepts and the traditions and the unity, and recovery and your
124 sobriety, you don't have a balanced program. It takes the three sides of the triangle to
125 make that circle. And I'm not um, right now in my sobriety, if I had to give up something
126 I'd give up the steps and I'd make the traditions first. Um, and I'm hoping that eventually
127 I'll feel like, I would keep the concepts. Uh, because I think they can be applied down to
128 the group and up to the international and I think it's harder to apply the traditions that
129 way. And of course, the steps are our internal program of how we recover. And after we
130 get those steps down, we should be able to grow more. Uh, I worked 20 years at the
131 hospital in behavioral health and I think, I've seen all these people coming out, and we
132 used to have the full continuum of services. We had the social detox, we had inpatient,
133 we had outpatient, we had a recovery house. And I've seen all those things be stripped
134 away for lack of money. And about five years ago I started telling my sponsees, you
135 know, we're going to have to go back to grass roots. Because there's going to be more
136 people coming in off the streets than there are from treatment centers. And I think that
137 curve is starting to happen. Um, the year I sobered up, '75, was the year the AMA
138 declared alcoholism a disease. And the oldtimers said, this is going to have an enormous
139 effect on us. And they were quite concerned about, with it now being a disease, with
140 insurance paying for treatment, how was that going to affect the fellowship of AA. And
141 uh, it did, it did. But again, I think we're on the end of that bell curve going down. I don't
142 know—

143 R6: What, what do you think the impact was?

144 P6: I'm gonna tell you. Part of the impact was you know, find a sponsor, do your steps
145 with a sponsor who's done the steps with a sponsor—that all came out of treatment
146 centers. The chants that we say at the end of meetings: keep coming back, it works if you
147 work it—those chants, that all came out of treatment centers. Saying thank you when
148 somebody shares came out of treatment centers. We didn't used to thank each other, you
149 were there to save your own ass! Why thank you, you know? I'm here to save my ass.
150 Pardon the language, but I'm there to save my ass, and I don't thank people.

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151 R7: And this was—you're saying that there was a sea change, really in how—what the
152 fellowship is and how people are introduced to the fellowship, was a product of practices
153 that were going on in treatment centers?

154 P7: Because what the treatment centers—what they have, they have some of the
155 education about what's a chronic alcoholic, but for people who go through treatment
156 centers to stay sober, they have to go to AA. And uh, a lot of the paperwork that they do
157 in treatment centers is centered around the things that AA does. Like, the personal
158 inventories, uh, your first steps—we never had to do a drunkalogue as my first step. You
159 know? The first three steps, if you came in and you stayed in, everybody assumed you
160 had done the first three steps. But nobody, nobody talked particularly about what step
161 they were on? Or how to work the steps? Because you had the Twelve and Twelve, you
162 can read the Twelve and Twelve, and you've got the Big Book. What more do you need?
163 Um, so there's been a lot more handholding. One of the things I do, I do a couple things
164 cause I'm such a rebellious person, one of them is I don't say thank you for people
165 sharing, um, at the end of meetings I say pass it on, cause that's what Bill Wilson said to
166 do was to pass it on, and I'm staring this new thing now, because I've run into a lot of
167 people recently who don't like the god aspect so much, so I am now, when I get a chance
168 when I chair, I open up with—we say the serenity prayer, I open up with the
169 responsibility statement, and I close with the unity statement. Cause that's all straight
170 AA.

171 R8: When did this shift take place? I mean, at what point in your sobriety did you become
172 aware of how this was changing—

173 P8: You mean to notice the impact? I saw the impact starting about 1983. Um, we used to
174 have before the alcohol community center did so much here, we had um, uh, detox that
175 these two brothers, the B brothers, somehow or other I don't know the mechanism but
176 they got four rooms at St. Luke's Hospital on the south side of town. And they had a
177 curtain up and that was the detox. Just this little wing. And um, I lived about two blocks
178 from there and I became the detox coordinator. And that's the first, yeah that's the first
179 time I was aware of AA and institutions. And we took in a meeting every Saturday night
180 and I coordinated it because if the person wasn't gonna show up that was supposed to

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181 chair, I could run down and chair. And I called them and—remember, you're gonna chair
182 the meeting! But you couldn't tell for sure if there was gonna be a meeting until that
183 night. Because some people were too sick, they only had four rooms, four beds, and so if
184 they had a woman then they could only have two men. Um,

185 R9: And did they have—were there a lot of women?

186 P9: No. There were very few women. When I sobered up in '75, it was not unusual for
187 me to be the only woman in a meeting.

188 R10: For how long?

189 P10: Well, I would guess until the beginning of the 80's for at least five years. And the
190 old guys used to really razz me. Because here I was, 31, I was short and I was cute, and I
191 spilled more than you could drink, and I said well good, I'm glad you did! Because it got
192 you here and I'm glad that you're here. You know? And for years, as long as I was an
193 area officer, when I got up to speak at the podium at the area, they would shout, stand up,
194 stand up we can't see you! And I would say, that's ok you don't have to see me, can you
195 hear me?? Because they never had any problems hearing me, so, as long as you can hear
196 me that's ok, you don't have to see me. As long as I was the area chair person I had a foot
197 stool I'd stand up on. And I had a barstool I'd sit up on so I was even with the mic, and
198 when I went to stand up I had the foot stool I'd stand up on. Because as chairperson you
199 really need control of the floor.

200 R11: Mm-hmm. Well it sounds like you had a pretty—I don't know, some kind of
201 composure, sort of from the beginning, that you were sort of able to meet their razzing
202 and—

203 P11: Oh yeah, oh yeah, they didn't bother me. They were funny. Yeah I don't think they
204 rattled me and I knew they did it out of love, that that was the way they showed affection
205 to me. Uh, so I didn't take it that seriously. I do remember E- and I, and that would have
206 had to have been probably when I was two years sober, had a discussion about there was
207 starting to be women only meetings—

208 R12: So this was the late 70's?

209 P12: Yeah, and we talked about—I talked to him about it and he said, you know, he
210 thought there were two sexes on the earth so we'd have to learn to get along together at

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211 some point in time. That is wouldn't be feasible for a woman to go into AA and never be
212 in a group where there weren't men. And I think that's probably true today. I see more
213 value in the women's meetings than I used to, but I didn't get on that bandwagon right
214 away. Because that was one of the things treatment centers brought us was different kinds
215 of groups; young people groups, men and women's groups, gay lesbian groups, and I
216 don't—I'm just putting them in that category because I have friends that are gay and
217 lesbians. I think sometimes you can get too specialized and you lose the bigger message.
218 And so yeah, I wasn't threatened by the old guys.

219 R13: There's something, and I'm not sure—maybe this is just for me to work out later or
220 maybe you can speak to it—there's something about your experience with—if I got as
221 sick as I did and I showed up and I was willing, I've done the first three steps. And we
222 don't have to sit down and go through all the gory details all the time. Sort of in a way it
223 allowed you to focus on the bigger message? And it sounds like you're saying that's
224 more how AA used to be.

225 P13: I think it was, I think it was. I know guys—I know somebody that came in in Akron
226 when Sister Ignatia was still there. And the guys that took him to meetings made him
227 wear a white shirt and tie and he couldn't talk for a year. They said, you listen for a year,
228 you don't have anything to say. Maybe after a year you'll have something to say. And so
229 I think it was in many ways, more hardcore, what we call hardcore, but I think it was also
230 done lovingly. Because up until that point where treatment centers came in, everybody
231 came in either through the jails or the crazy houses or the street. Those were the access
232 points to AA. And um, I was convinced for a long time that to be able to sober up in AA
233 you had to see the face of death. You had to get right there and see the face of death. Now
234 I've seen more people come in that weren't that low, but I've also seen a lot of people
235 slip. We didn't have that many slippers. And if you did, everybody got concerned and
236 everybody came around and if you slipped more than twice, nobody paid any attention to
237 you.

238 R14: They just didn't take you seriously.

239 P14: No. And um, so, we have people that come in every week, oh I'm back, I'm back,
240 and they all clap, and so they're getting attention for slipping. I heard a guy, I heard a guy

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241 before I retired, from DASA, department of alcohol and substance abuse, came up to
242 review the laws with us, cause they passed new laws, uh, and he said alcoholism is a
243 disease of relapse. And I'm going like, this state guy shouldn't be saying this. Nobody
244 should say that. Because if you call it a program of relapse people are going to feel like
245 they have permission to relapse. You know. The idea is that you come in and you stay
246 sober, not you come in and you go out, you come in you go out, you come in—that's not
247 the idea of alcoholics anonymous. It's, it's for those that really are serious about their
248 sobriety. So you know, I think that something treatment centers did, they gave
249 permission—because that was their feeding trough. Um, I remember one time a
250 discussion of the oldtimers at the B- group, uh, they were talking about modern medicine
251 has now found out how many brain cells you kill from alcoholism. And, and the
252 discussion was, do I want to know how many brain cells I lost or not? And the majority
253 of them said, I don't care. I'm functioning, I have a job, I have my family I have my
254 home, I don't care what I lost. I'm making due with what I've got. And I think if you just
255 carry that forward to treatment centers, they want to tell you how many brain cells you're
256 gonna lose. You know.

257 R15: Medicalizing the whole problem—

258 P15: Yeah. And I know it's a medical problem. You know, it took me six months to feel
259 anything with my legs. But at the same time, it's a spiritual fellowship. You're not
260 entering into a medical realm—when you come to AA you're entering a spiritual
261 fellowship. As weird as that sounds and as big as we've gotten, you're still entering a
262 spiritual fellowship. And the only reason all this is there is to help the suffering alcoholic.
263 No other reason. Not to make money, not to fulfill laws, you know. Just to help the
264 suffering alcoholic. And you can't help them unless they want to be helped.

265 R16: Right. So, what led you, what kind of experiences led you to find the value in
266 women's meetings, or to not value them before.

267 P16: Um, I'm going to be clear, I don't go to women's meetings. There is one women's
268 meeting here in town that I've gone to, and I went to it—this is 2014, I went to it
269 probably 14 years ago when it was really a group—a meeting, they didn't really want to
270 become a group and they'd gotten down to just a few members. And I went to try and

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271 encourage people to go, and I could see that it was helping these women. But the fact that
272 they were going to a meeting every Monday, was not helping them learn AA. It was
273 helping them to talk through their problems, and it was encouraging if people were there
274 because they knew maybe they could come next Monday and maybe stay sober Monday
275 to Monday. Or maybe they'd find another group to go to or another meeting. But they,
276 eventually they became fairly large, but they didn't know the difference between a
277 meeting and a group. But they called me in, just this year to give them—I do a little
278 service talk with the Matrioska dolls, and I used to do this for ADATSA or indigent
279 outpatient people. I would go in every month and give this little talk, you know, the
280 nesting dolls? I'd start out with the big one and—first I'd make them write the circle and
281 the triangle, then I'd start with the big one, and I wouldn't say what that was, and
282 eventually somebody wouldn't come up with it and—when you come up with it, don't
283 say it out loud. And then I'd go down smaller and smaller and smaller and the smallest
284 little baby doll is AA worldwide. And I'd show them how the committee system runs
285 through all that and uh, what the term of service is about the trustees, about the general
286 service conference, you know I could cover all that. And so that's the service talk. I went
287 into a group one time and this guy comes up to me and says, you're the doll lady! You're
288 the doll lady! I thought wow, that would be nice to be known as the doll lady. And I don't
289 remember him, but I've had a lot of people say—in fact, I sponsor a lady whose got 25,
290 26 years of sobriety who remembers me coming in and doing that lecture. But of course I
291 didn't remember her, but...

292 R17: Right...and so the focus, the significance of that is that it helps people get the big
293 picture of the AA program?

294 P17: Well, it shows them that AA is more than just going to a meeting. That there are
295 other things you can do in AA besides just going to a meeting, and if you're going to be a
296 responsible member of AA one, you need to belong to a group. Because treatment
297 doesn't tell people to belong to groups. Treatment tells them to go to meetings and get a
298 sponsor.

299 R18: So that ties in with your emphasis on service.

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300 P18: Yeah, but they don't—it doesn't, treatment doesn't a distinction between what a
301 meeting is and what a group is. And what AA does and what AA does not do. They don't
302 discuss those things in treatment. You leave treatment, at least my impression is, you
303 leave treatment and you feel like AA is going to be everything to you. You know, and it
304 will be a lot to you if you work the program. But it's not going to be everything. Um, I
305 had uh, ten years of sobriety and I went back to get my degree. And I went back with 168
306 credits. So, you know, I had enough credits to get my degree I just hadn't put anything
307 together. And I wanted to be a teacher, well, in the meantime I had two kids, so after I
308 had the kids I decided I didn't want to be trapped in a room full of children. Two kids
309 was enough of a teaching experience for me. So I went too—I went around and I looked
310 at becoming, at doing something in the field of alcoholism. And my big thing is, I never
311 want to, I never want to make money out of my disease. So, and they—the department
312 was human services and they were like, oh, we'll barter you with this we'll barter you
313 with that and, I thought oh, I don't want to do that kind of stuff. So I went over to
314 Fairhaven and I designed my own major and my minor. My minor is library science, I
315 basically had all the courses, and my major is administration and oral history of our
316 elderly community. Because at that time nobody was studying geriatrics and I wanted to
317 study geriatrics. And I eventually did take another intensive course, it was a year and a
318 half, for that. When they finally saw that there was a need. Um, and that's one of the
319 things I do with women, is I encourage them, no matter what their age, to get their
320 degree. Because I don't think I made more money because of my degree—if anything I
321 made more money because of some of the things I was raised with and I learned in
322 service. Like you know, how to control four microphones and a thousand people all at
323 once is not something that you learn anywhere but by going through that experience. So,
324 um, and my first job—I worked at a bank. Uh, when I had three years of sobriety I
325 worked for this bank for ten years and I quit that job, but they wouldn't let me quit. They
326 kept me on the payroll because they didn't—I don't know why, they wanted to be able to
327 call me if they needed help I guess. And so after I got my degree I went back and I
328 worked in accounting. And I did a number of really nice things for them. But I did
329 general ledgers for the bank, I read seven general ledgers in two hours. And they had

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330 never had anybody read that fast and then, anybody that made a mistake I had to call
331 them and tell them they made a mistake. So I had to use diplomacy too. And um, so it
332 was a part time job, so economically it was pretty hard. And up in the county there was a
333 band called Randy Bachman, Bachman Turner Overdrive? And his mansion is up off H
334 street road in Whatcom County. And he sold his mansion to a group of people that made
335 it into a treatment center. And it only lasted about six years. But it was um, and they
336 asked me to come out and design the office. And I said, well I don't want to make money
337 off my disease and they said well, you're not. You're doing the paperwork. So that's
338 where I went out and designed the nurses files, the counselor's files, the patient files, and
339 even some stuff for the kitchen. And then I did all the admissions and discharges. And I
340 had to learn the Washington administrative codes. And so when they started to go
341 downhill they dismissed me first, one because I was a higher paid employee, and two,
342 because I trained all my staff to take over for me. Because to me, that's the responsible
343 thing to do. And so um, they really didn't miss my presence that much. And then I
344 applied for jobs at the hospital. And the first one I applied for I didn't get, but in the
345 interview for that first one I told the guy, I know the Washington Administrative codes.
346 Because, my director at Meridian had made me keep up to date on them. And about six
347 months later the hospital had taken the community alcohol outreach center had bought it
348 out, had bought recovery Northwest, so they were adding all the components to have the
349 whole um, spectrum of treatment services and they had to have new manuals. And this
350 guy called me and said, we need your help with the laws, we've got to have manuals in
351 two weeks. So I went through and I did all their manuals, and the guys that came to do
352 the review were friends of my manager up at Meridian, because he came from—the
353 manager up there came from the state system, so I knew all these guys, you know. And
354 they were the funky old guys that first came in when they were trying to build a welfare
355 system for alcoholism. So I sat down with them and if they found something that wasn't
356 quite right they'd say well, this isn't quite right it should be like this and I'd say ok, and
357 I'd go and change it and bring it back. So that was the first time they had a review that
358 they didn't have any dings on it. And so they hired me, they knew they wanted me on
359 their staff and I eventually wound up being the person that negotiated all the contracts, all

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360 the public funding contracts. And um, uh, so I wasn't really making money off my
361 disease, it was off my skills...

362 R19: Yeah, your experience and knowledge.

363 P19: Yeah. Uh, and that was fun. That was fun, that was really fun.

364 R20: But also, no doubt, you were still involved in service?

365 P20: Yeah, yeah. During that time um, I think right when I went to work for the hospital
366 was my last area service job. And then I had to deal with repercussions here, because I'd
367 been in area service for so long everybody knew me and when I went into a meeting
368 they'd have these expectations of me. Like, I went into the B- group one time and the guy
369 who was getting ready to chair the meeting and who I'd known for a while, said, is it time
370 to start the meeting? I said, I don't know, D-, it's your meeting! And he waited a while
371 and then he says, is it time to start the meeting? I said, D-! I don't know! It's not my
372 meeting it's your meeting, you start it when you're supposed to start it! And I'd have
373 people looking at me like that, so for about four or five years I kept a really low profile. I
374 even tried to go into Dry dock disguised. I wore sunglasses and I had my hair down cause
375 they never see me with my hair down and I had a big hat on and I had really old grubby
376 clothes on and I went in late and I sat down on a bench, I sat down on the bench and guy
377 who was chairing it was Mike and I sat down and thought, oh I'm going to forget what
378 the topic is, the moment I sat down he said well, we haven't heard from M- for a long
379 time, M-would you like to chair? And it just blew my cover. But I wanted to wait until
380 enough new people came in that people wouldn't know me. Because I think the graves
381 thing you can do is become a guru. I just wanted to become a worker bee among worker
382 bees. I'd done these other things and they were fun and it was good and I improved the
383 area—they're still using the financial system I set up..which was credit lines because
384 every body loves credit. They weren't spending their money proportionately so with
385 credit lines the pressure was on to spend their money...so Um, one of the things I like to
386 talk about is I started a group. Um, in about 1986 and it was done by '91, only last about
387 five years and it was at my house. It was called the four reflections. And the first Monday
388 we studied the big book, second Monday we studied the twelve by twelve, the third
389 Monday we did the service manual, the fourth Monday we did the concepts and if there

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390 was a fifth Monday we started the stories in the back of the big book. And I read through
391 each of those books at least five times in that group. And it was maybe 8 to 10 people but
392 we had repeaters come in so it was a real personal way to study the framework of AA. I
393 still think that's a good format.

394 R21: So, that makes me want to ask more about this distinction that you're making
395 between meetings and groups and how you know you're getting what you need, how you
396 know that a meeting is doing its job, how you know that it's a good meeting—or a good
397 group.

398 P21: One, you don't go to sleep.

399 R22: Ok, so it's interesting.

400 P22: Two, you don't get bored, three, it talks about—somebody somewhere in the
401 meeting talks about where you are in your sobriety.

402 R23: So you hear your own experience somewhere.

403 P23: You hear your own experiences and you see people have lived your experiences that
404 may have a lot more sobriety that you do. Or you learn something new about AA that you
405 didn't know. Right now I go to F- group. And both Sunday night and Thursday night are
406 study groups. I rarely go to a discussion group anymore because I find they don't
407 encourage my growth. I find that I hear a lot of people's problems, I don't hear much of
408 the solution. And when you're studying the literature you're working on the solutions as
409 you study the literature. We're reading—on Sunday nights we're reading Language of the
410 Heart, which, a lot of people haven't read it. And it gives you a quick—it's Bill W.'s
411 writings from the Grapevine and it gives you a quick historical outline of how the
412 traditions came about and how the service structure came about and the next sections
413 going to be how we interact with our friends, how we cooperate without affiliating. And
414 there's people in there with 40 days sobriety that love that meeting. Because it gets them
415 out of themselves a little bit. I think a good meeting, a good group is one who takes you
416 in—and I say to people don't join a group until you've gone to the business meeting. And
417 if you don't like the business meeting go around and visit the groups business meeting
418 and pick your group by how the group's business meeting goes. Because if—when you
419 sit in a business meeting you can tell, is this something I would consider a positive thing

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420 or a negative thing. Are people really yelling and screaming at each other? Wally W-
421 used to say, he was so glad the group grew up because they quit hitting each other with
422 chairs during the meeting. And I always wondered, did he really see somebody hit
423 somebody with a chair? But, the Fairhaven business meeting is fun. I mean, we laugh, we
424 have a good time. It's not gnashing our teeth and pulling our hair out. And we take things
425 on to the district, but um, we do a lot of housekeeping and we have positions, right now
426 we have three alternate positions open which is the first we've had open in years.
427 Because when a new person comes in, we give them a position right away. You can be a
428 greeter, you know, you can be a setup person. And then you learn you have to have this
429 much sobriety before you can go on and be this, and be that. And that keeps people
430 hooked in. It really does, if you have a group that you know someone is expecting you to
431 be at that meeting for whatever reason, you're more likely to go to that meeting than to
432 say, I don't need a meeting today I don't feel like going, and not going.

433 R24: You're talking about something that—even your emphasis on the traditions instead
434 of the steps—there's a thread through here that's really about um, growth. Like, you want
435 your sponsees to go to school and you hook people into the progressive nature of the
436 steps—

437 P24: Yeah, well that's what recovery is! And I often think recovery is going back and
438 being the person we were meant to be before we started drinking. And I think that's
439 easier for some people, for some people it's harder. But if you're not growing what kind
440 of sobriety do you have? What you have is, you're saying the same things over and over
441 again and eventually you're going to come to the point where you're white-knuckling
442 your sobriety. Where, conversely, you're sobriety should be fun. You know, when I have
443 my birthdays—and I get really embarrassed when I have my birthdays because I'm the
444 senior sober person in my homegroup. And that embarrasses me because I don't want
445 people thinking they should look up to me for any reason, I just want to be part of the
446 milieu. But then, I have this birthday and I know some of the people who've been in there
447 for a couple years, when they have new people come in they say, that's the oldest sober
448 person. Somebody said to me last night—I said, thanks for chairing, and she said, I just
449 hated to cuss in front of you! And I don't even know what she said that she was cussing,

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450 but, why would she hate to cuss in front of me? You know? That's not a big deal, honey!
451 So I think that, you have to—you know if you're not going forward you're stagnating.
452 And alcohol is going to be waiting for you. We're the one fellowship out of all the self-
453 help fellowships—that's another little protest I'm doing, is this is not a twelve step
454 program, this is not a self-help program. We have the traditions and we have the
455 concepts. We have 36 facets, we don't have twelve steps. We have twelve steps but we
456 have more than twelve, we have 36. So if you're just doing the twelve, you're missing
457 out on something. But if you're not into the solution and growing, you're stagnating.
458 We're the only fellowship that if you don't do it you're gonna die. You know, you don't
459 die of gambler's anonymous. You don't die of eaters anonymous. You may die of
460 diabetes or coronary disease, but you don't die because you quit going to eaters
461 anonymous. But if you quit going to AA the alcohol will catch up with you and you will
462 die of alcoholism. So we always have that extra little push because we're saving lives.
463 And some of those people that come in that haven't hit the bottom yet, that's still waiting
464 for them. All they have to do is come in and be complacent. On my birthdays, one of the
465 things I say to people is one of the reasons I keep coming back to AA is because it's fun.
466 And there's nothing more fun than watching people grow. Watching people come in that
467 are totally obsessed with themselves and learning that there's a world out there. And
468 they're not always number one in that world out there. But watching people grow, that's
469 a big priority in my life. And for me too!

470 R25: And you do that—you do sponsor people?

471 P25: Yes. I never raise my hand to sponsor people and if somebody comes up and asks
472 me to sponsor them I say no. And then if they say why not I tell them and if they don't
473 care about that then maybe I'll sponsor them. Because I would have hundreds of
474 sponsees. I don't want hundreds of sponsees.

475 R26: So how—when is the last time you had that conversation? How did it go?

476 P26: It went really well. I have a sponsee that has—most of my sponsees have—I have a
477 sponsee with ten years and three of them have over 25 years. So we've been friends for a
478 really long time. But I'm still their sponsor in fact, I had one of them say to me yesterday,
479 do you realize you ordered me to do something? And I said no, I didn't realize that. And

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480 she said, well I did it because you told me to do it and she says, I'm really glad I did it!
481 And I said, well good. But my new sponsee is on um, she's got not quite 60 days
482 sobriety. And uh, she asked me to be her sponsor and I said no. And she didn't ask why
483 not. And she went away and she came back and she said, well can I meet with you and
484 ask you some questions and I said, yeah. And so that's how that started.

485 R27: And so is there now—or was there a point where she said, well you kind of are
486 being my sponsor...

487 P27: Well, we agreed that I would be her sponsor. She's working on her fourth step.
488 She's doing 90 meetings in 90 days! She was doing that before I sponsored her. That's
489 one of the reasons I sponsored her. If on her own she decided to do that and is going
490 through with that, it's a woman who really wants sobriety.

491 R28: So that's sort of your criteria? You sort of decide if it's worth it, if this person is
492 really invested, if they really want it.

493 P28: Yeah.

494 R29: Do you sponsor men at all?

495 P29: I have some service sponsors that are men, of sponsoring their service, telling them
496 about some fine points of their jobs or give them some suggestions of the finer points
497 when they're committee chair or that kind of thing. I always talk to them when elections
498 are coming up. I have one guy I don't sponsor in any way but whenever the area elections
499 are coming up he always comes to me and asks if he can make himself available for this
500 or for that. I don't know why he thinks I have to give him permission. I think he thinks
501 that if I thought there was another position he should apply for I would tell him and tell
502 him why. Maybe. One time I asked him, I said A--, why are you asking me? And he says,
503 well I just want to make sure you think it's the right thing, you know? Of course it's the
504 right thing. You always have to make yourself available! If you don't—you know, cause
505 they used to poll. That's one thing they didn't do this past year in the elections because
506 they used to go around and poll each GSR. Because if you call on a GSR and say are you
507 available for this position and you go around and poll them for each position, some of
508 them are going to cave in and take positions that they would have never taken any other
509 way. And that keeps people from duplicating jobs. See, I don't believe, if you've done

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one job I don't believe in doing it again. Because you're taking up space for somebody that needs to learn. I still chair meetings, and I do my little meeting of having a meeting without doing the serenity prayer. And my home group is pretty loving with me about that. They know all my little foibles you know. And last night for the first time, somebody closed the group—when it was time to do a prayer of his choice, he closed with the, I am responsible. So slowly I'm making some inroads, and it doesn't have to be a god prayer, it just has to be the fellowship. And here's things you can do in the fellowship that are not god-labeled. And I don't think anything about doing the serenity prayer or the lords prayer, but I have noticed there are people who are uncomfortable with that. And we should be available to everybody. We shouldn't make people uncomfortable because we're so god-oriented. And that's what this newcomer was asking me was, what kind of higher power do I have to have? And we talked our way through that because she had an answer, she just didn't know it was her higher power, and it was nature. And she said, can I use that? And I said, sure you can use that. Because if that's what you think is bigger than you are and you feel close to it and you feel one when you're with it, that's your higher power. Because I don't think you get very far unless you have a higher power. The other thing I want to say is, having sponsees and having a service position is like taking a vacation. You're taking a vacation from thinking about yourself when you're thinking about your sponsees. Or you're trying to work them into seeing another viewpoint or you're trying to get them to come to their own wisdom. And when you're doing a service job you're not thinking about yourself. You're thinking about what that job is and how it fulfills a function for your group or your district or your area. So when I see people who are really myopic I say to them, get a sponsee. Get a service position. Get something that's going to make you think outside yourself.

R30: Widen the lens.

P30: Because you won't be successful in your life if you think the world revolves around you. When I worked at the hospital I had a staff of fifteen. And I ran my staff according to the concepts. And they were all happy. And I'd have other managers ask me why my staff was so happy. One, they set their own schedule. They knew the front desk had to be covered from this to this, but they also knew I didn't care who was there. As long as they

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540 gave me a list at the beginning of them month saying who was going to be there so I
541 didn't go out looking like an idiot thinking somebody was going to be there. But they
542 could negotiate with each other what days they wanted off. If somebody had to go to a
543 doctor's appointment, you know, they accepted the responsibility for the authority I gave
544 them. And that was really responsible for managers in other departments to figure out.
545 And whenever we had a meeting I always heard the minority report before we voted on
546 anything. Because it doesn't do—because if you hear it afterwards then you might have
547 to revote, so save the time and hear the minority report before you vote. So, they didn't
548 know that's what it was, and but they all knew that their vote was equal to my vote,
549 unless I had a mandate from my boss that said something had to be done. I'll tell you, I
550 was an equal with them. And they were all very sad when that part of the services shut
551 down. They just hated to lose that job because they loved their jobs, they were invested in
552 their jobs.

553 R31: So you're talking about your life and your goal of never making money off your
554 disease, but there is a sense that—you did keep it separate, so AA is not a vocation. But
555 AA informs your entire life.

556 P31: Well yeah, how can it not? How can it not? For me that's what it is, that that's the
557 way I live my entire life. I don't always share with people what it is, you know. Um, but I
558 think that's an avenue of growth for everyone. And you know, my primary purpose on
559 my job was to service the customers of behavioral health and that included contract stats
560 that we had to take and things like that that were really very involved, and very detailed
561 kinds of work. So, why not use that method for them? I didn't have to say, this is what we
562 do in AA, it was just, this is what I do as a manager. So there's a lot of times I'm using
563 AA that people don't have any idea that's what I'm using. Um, I think I've assimilated
564 AA into my personality. And into everything I do. And um, I think it gives a measure of
565 serenity to my life. I have some really sticky things in my life, I have a daughter who is
566 37 years old and has been drunk since she was twelve. Right now she's—I keep expecting
567 her to come out. She's sleeping off a drunk. She came out of treatment two weeks ago
568 and drank on the second day out. She's trying to get into a clean and sober house now.
569 She's also trying for the first time to get a payee. Because when she's on the streets

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570 people rob her. And so, if she had a payee that was just giving her a little bit at a time, it
571 wouldn't be—all the money for the rest of the month is gone. And she'd be able to pay
572 her bills. She finally got in trouble this year to where she got a felony. And so, if she
573 doesn't stay sober she's gonna end up in jail.

574 R31: How do you contextualize that? I mean, I don't want to put words in your mouth so,
575 it's not exactly service...how do you contextualize helping your daughter?

576 P31: I have to work my program of recovery and not work hers. I can encourage her with
577 recovery, but she's my sobriety baby. She grew up in AA. She knows the steps, she
578 knows the traditions. I would not be a bit surprised even if she knows the concepts!
579 Because she's heard all that all her life, and because it's mine she doesn't want to come
580 into the fellowship. You know, I try to get her to go to meetings I don't go to, go to
581 women's meetings, you know, but she's still rebelling. Not as much as she was before
582 because she's been beaten down quite a bit. See, not only is she a drunk, she has cerebral
583 palsy. And she has mental health problems. So you know, she's fighting a battle on three
584 bases whereas I only had to fight a battle on one base. So I have a lot of compassion for
585 her, I have a lot of admiration for her. Because she can be a drunk this long, this hard and
586 not totally crumble speaks a lot to her character. You know, I don't let her live with me,
587 she just came by this morning, I'm letting her sleep but she's not staying here over night.
588 I'm keeping closer tabs on her right now because Wednesday she has a really important
589 medical appointment. So I'm keeping tabs on her. I said she could come tomorrow night
590 so she could clean up before she goes to that appointment. It's really hard to drop a kid
591 off downtown, you know. And now she's lost her cane. So it's going to be really hard on
592 her the rest of the month because when she's drinking she depends on that cane. And
593 there's been times when the police, the ambulance has been called because she's fallen
594 face down. The hospital has pages and pages on her. And it's sad, and it's tragic. It's—
595 I'm powerless. I'm powerless over that girl. I can only love her as a mother and do things
596 that are motherly things. I cannot help her as a suffering alcoholic because she doesn't
597 want what I have. I hope someday she will.

598 R32: Mm, OK. Do you believe that AA can be the solution for her?

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599 P32: uh-huh. I believe it can be part of the solution. She has to do medical things, she has
600 to keep her meds going and she has to work on um, getting her body healthy. But I think
601 AA would be a start, because if she can stay sober she can reason her way through those
602 other things. Where if she's toxic it's very hard for her to do her meds, do that
603 consistency, get to treatment on time, get to the doctors on time. Everything goes out the
604 window when she's really toxic.

605 R33: What do you mean—I know what the word means, but what do you mean when you
606 say that she has a strong character? Or she has a lot of character?

607 P33: One, she hasn't killed herself. She hasn't become so totally without hope. Um, that
608 she's able to survive in a world downtown that's like sharks swimming. That she has
609 enough to be able to stay in that environment and not totally get eaten up. Cause as a
610 disabled addict, she's prey for people. And she hasn't, you know she hasn't let that
611 dampen her sense of humor. I love traveling with her. In the last five years I've sobered
612 her up on the road the old-fashioned way, just wean them off. And when she's traveling
613 she sobers up real nicely because the scenery is changing. And then as my copilot she has
614 a little responsibility for keeping us on the right road and so that gives her something to
615 do.

616 R34: Mm-hmm. What does character have to do with getting sober?

617 P34: I think character...I think character traits have to—there's certain character traits
618 you have to have to be sober. One is, you have to be stubborn. I mean, and these are
619 things all alcoholics have. You have to be stubborn, you have to concede that there might
620 be something other than you. You have to have an ability to think of others. Because
621 some people don't have that ability, they just don't have it. You have to be tenacious in
622 what you want. And I think you have to be tenacious in wanting sobriety, no matter
623 where you come in on the faces of alcoholism. You really have to want it to stay and
624 work the program and get it. And I think those are all character traits. You know,
625 alcoholics are really stubborn people but they're very gifted people at the same time,
626 because they do ingenious things. Um, I locked myself out of my car one time when I
627 was DCM. I was on the way to the area meeting, I had my car all packed I had a GSR
628 meeting to go to, I took my notebook for the GSR meeting and shut the trunk, and my

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629 keys were there. And those guys broke into my car, took the backseat out, and gave me
630 my keys!

631 R35: (laughing) I believe it!

632 P35: Yeah! And that's that ingenious part, you know. They're very pragmatic. I've seen
633 alcoholics work out situations that would have baffled anyone except a group of
634 alcoholics. And they get together and they want to go to point B and they're going to
635 figure out how to get to point B! You know? And so I think there are certain character
636 traits that help you, but at the same time, you have to have the honesty side. If you're not
637 honest and you don't have the desire, you're not going to make it. You know, you'll be
638 out there drinking again. And that's what C- doesn't have, is the utmost desire. Part of it
639 is because she doesn't like AA because she thinks of AA as having taken her mother
640 away. She doesn't realize, AA gave her her mother. So, and you know, I told her not to
641 talk about me because she talks about me a lot. I told her, go to the AA meetings I don't
642 go to and don't talk about me, nobody's gonna know who you are! Cause she thinks of
643 herself as a marked kid. Well, at 38 years old you're not a kid anymore, and she's not
644 marked. She just hasn't realized that because that's her hangup. It breaks my heart
645 sometimes. And I have to do that fine line of not enabling but doing the motherly things
646 like the medical help.

647 R36: Mm. So, how do you take care of yourself when your heart is broken?

648 P36: I take care of myself really well. Uh, in the last five years I have adopted a –I have a
649 recumbent elliptical. And I do really good speeds when I want to work off stuff about her.
650 Normally I do 35 minutes four times a week. And I go 11.2 miles and hour and I can do
651 up to six and a half miles. And I could do better except my lungs are kind of shot from
652 smoking so much. Um, and I do weights and I do floor exercises. But when my heart's
653 really broken is when I'll read a good novel. Most of the time I read nonfiction. I'll read
654 two to three books a week. So that's always a great escapism.

655 R37: So there's a balance. Exercise, entertainment, and then you talked about sponsees
656 are a break from yourself—are you able to work with sponsees when you're in a low
657 place?

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658 P37: I am. And my work with them might be even better. But you know, I have six
659 sponsees and only one of them is in the recovery phase. The rest are all in, how am I
660 going to live my life?

661 R38: Is that recovered then, for you?

662 P38: Well, they're not in um, I would say they are recovered, that doesn't mean that they
663 don't need AA. But they're thinking beyond the 12 steps most of the time. They've
664 assimilated the 12 steps and they live their life in bigger way. But every once in a while
665 they'll get stuck on something. And that's when I get that phone call, I think I know what
666 I need to do but I'm just not sure what I need to do? And we work the problem out.

667 R39: And it's likely to be a life problem, not a—

668 P39: It could be an AA problem. I had one girl that uh, got into the routine of going to a
669 meeting and there was always one guy at the meeting and she felt like he was always
670 picking on her, but she saw that he was picking on everyone because he was not happy at
671 the meeting. But she goes to the meeting and says if I talk before he does then he picks
672 apart everything I say. And I said, well, don't go to that meeting. And she says well, it's a
673 handy meeting, I really like going to that meeting, and I said well, then don't let him get
674 through to you. Don't talk until after he talks. Sit behind him so you can watch what he's
675 doing and you don't have to get involved with him. And eventually, she became
676 comfortable and accepted him and he was no longer a thorn in her side. But it took a
677 couple months. Several months. So that's an AA problem and from somebody whose got
678 a lot of sobriety. But sometimes, a lot of things get to us. And then you've got to drop
679 back and you know which step you need to work on.

680 R40: Have you reworked the steps? I mean, I know you didn't work the steps they way
681 that people do now, but do you go back, do you write? What does your maintenance look
682 like?

683 P40: I don't journal on a regular basis. But I do do some journalizing. My maintenance is
684 touching base with my sponsees on a regular basis. Either they touch base with me or I
685 touching base with them. Cause if I don't hear from somebody for a couple weeks I'll
686 give them a call and say hey, what's going on. So, doing my sponsees, going to meetings,
687 doing service work. You know, where I dabble. Um, continuing to grow. Continuing to

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688 find things that make people comfortable in AA. Like this thing about having a meeting
689 without saying a prayer to go. It took me a long time to figure out that solution. You
690 know, and now I have to model it. And I'll probably model it for—well one guys already
691 got the idea because he used it. But I'll model it for all during my summer stuff, and
692 probably sometime next winter somebody will chair a meeting and do that. I quit talking
693 about this is not a twelve step program because people in my homegroup say that now.
694 They don't know where they heard it, but they say it.

695 R41: You're planting seeds!

696 P41: I am. Just like I you know, I haven't even covered this part of my life, this is a big
697 part of my life [gestures to yard] is I make salves and oils and tinctures and teas, and so
698 growing these—almost everything that you're looking at has some medical value. And
699 you walked past a lot of medicine coming in here. So I'm harvesting, I'm drawing, I'm
700 canting and decanting. So that's just sort of another whole side of my life.

701 R42: And, it's growth! All the time, all kinds of growth.

702 P42: Yeah, I encourage growth, I encourage growth. Um, and I guess that's my big thing
703 in life, although I think I'm at appoint where I feel really serene—I mean, I'm seventy
704 years old. How much more do you want out of life than what I have? You know? A sober
705 daughter would be nice, because she's better to travel with, but um, I really think I've got
706 the best of all possible worlds. I can work the land when I need to work the land. I can
707 work my spiritual self when I need to work that. I am obviously working on my physical
708 self. Um, scary story to tell you is um, I had 31 years of sobriety and I went in for an
709 ultrasound and they saw a shadow. And you know how they always tell you you're not
710 supposed to talk to your doctor at meetings? Well my doctor came to a meeting to talk to
711 me! I couldn't believe it! He corralled me, he said I came here because I needed to tell
712 you something. I said, well what do you need to tell me? He says, they found a spot on
713 your ultrasound and you need to come in my office because we're going to need to do a
714 cat scan. And what they found was uh, the size of a golf ball, a tumor on the end of my
715 pancreas. And it is caused by vomiting. In women. It's a thing that only women get and
716 it's caused by ferocious vomiting. And now, I always thought to be a good alcoholic you
717 had to learn to vomit. Because you know, you vomit a lot to keep that first drink down.

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718 Maybe you don't know, but I know. In my day, I did a lot of vomiting. And uh, they kept
719 saying, do you have an eating disorder? Have you been really, really ill? And the answer
720 is no. So, it had to be caused by my drinking. So, it was there 31 years, and at year 36, it
721 started to grow. And it didn't change much, but it changed a little bit. And they said, we
722 would advise you to have this taken out. So three years ago I had it taken out and they
723 took out my spleen, and they took out about a third of my pancreas. And um, I just had
724 the three year cat scan that, the tumor didn't come back. My pancreas is totally normal,
725 smaller. And my uh, levels, like for being diabetic, are back to what they were before this
726 surgery. So, I'm doing something right. And what my doctor said was, he had me go
727 down to Virginia Mason for the surgery and I have not received any bills. I don't know
728 what happened to them, maybe they'll still come, I hope not, but I had my—I retired, and
729 the day after I retired I had my operation. And I was on like a six month thing from the
730 hospital so I had my, my healthcare was still good. And everybody along the way knew
731 that and talked to me about my retirement and what are you gonna do, you know. And I
732 don't know how the bills got paid—I got one bill from Virginia Mason, and I sent it to
733 them and they sent it back to me.

734 R43: Wow! A miracle somehow...a gift?

735 P43: It was a gift. A heavenly gift. And my doctor says to me, we caught it just before the
736 catch it in time, time. So you know, when they say they caught something just in time?
737 We caught it right before that. And he says, you can't ask for anything better than that.
738 So, you know, I don't like to brag. But I think I'm living ok. I think I'm going to be ok.
739 When I sobered up the old timers would talk about this at every single meeting—I just
740 want to die sober. I do not want to die a drunk. And I don't hear people talking about that
741 very much anymore. And I think that's one of the things that made those guys stronger
742 about their sobriety because they didn't slip. They were in there for the long haul and
743 they knew they were in there for the long haul. And so last night we were reading...what
744 was it. Something, and they, I shared that, whatever it was the topic was, I think it
745 was...it was service but it was something about service after the convention in '55. And I
746 said you know, if I hadn't gotten sober I would have died a drunk and it would not be a
747 pretty death. So now, I can have a beautiful death. And everybody laughed at me because

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748 they thought that was funny—my group laughs at me a lot, and that's ok! I like them to
749 laugh at me! But that's really true. I feel like I can have a good death. My funeral is
750 already paid for, my house a little big of mortgage but when they sell it after I die they'll
751 still get a little bit of money. Uh, I just feel like, I'm in my end years. Maybe even my
752 golden years. And um, uh, however I die it's going to be ok, it's going to be ok. I don't
753 worry about dying drunk. And if I have cancer I want palliative care and I want to be pain
754 free and I will not worry about becoming an addict. If I get to that point where I have to
755 have that that's what I'll do. I won't feel guilty about it. Because, but it will be narcotics,
756 it won't be alcoholic. I doubt that they'll give me a fifth and say go ahead and die, I can't
757 imagine that. But it won't be of my choosing—I want to stay off meds as long as I can.
758 My family has always been a family that talks about death. And we don't hide it from our
759 children. My parents didn't hide it from me. And so, I feel like I'm getting there you
760 know, and it's ok.

761 R44: Mm. What a gift.

762 P44: I've had 39 years given to me. In January it'll be 40 years. That were just a gift.
763 There's no other way to describe those last decades of my life. If I hadn't had that
764 experience, if I hadn't got that guy who was just so straight-laced, who let me grow at my
765 own pace, he didn't push me he didn't prod me he didn't make me uncomfortable, he just
766 let me grow. I'm so lucky I didn't go through a treatment center. If I'd gone through a
767 treatment center I would have been saying fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, and probably
768 wouldn't have lasted 29 days. But I wouldn't have gotten sober from them talking to me.

769 R45: You needed...space in some significant way. You were allowed to work through
770 things that get forced down people's throats these days.

771 P45: Yes. Yes. And I think that is the only way you're gonna be secure in your sobriety.
772 Because if somebody forces you to do something eventually you're going to rebel against
773 that. You know, alcoholics are rebellious, and if there's anything to grab onto to rebel,
774 we'll do that. We're giving them and out when we force them to do stuff. First time I
775 heard they were doing fourth steps in treatment, I about fell over. Because somebody
776 that's got 28 days of sobriety has no idea how to do a fourth step. They don't even know
777 how to stay sober yet, you know? They're on the first step!

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778 R46: So there's something there too about that way that you—you won't just sponsor
779 anybody, there has to be something there, and maybe even a little bit of the right kind of
780 chemistry between you and the woman who's asking for your help. It's almost like, I'm
781 wondering if there's something in there that, um...

782 P46: I would be doing a disservice to somebody who needed a sponsor who was gonna sit
783 down and say call me, I want you to call me at four o'clock every day, I want you to read
784 this page in the big book, then I want you to read this page in the book—I would be doing
785 a disservice to the person who needs that kind of guidance.

786 [daughter came out of the house, we paused for several minutes]

787 R47: Well, we have talked for about an hour and 20 minutes and I promised to keep it to
788 90, so—

789 P47: So you ask me anything you want.

790 R48: So I want to know, before we finish up, if there is anything else that you think I
791 should know that I didn't allude to. And I also realized that we got away from the
792 meeting versus group distinction and I want to make sure I understand how you're
793 defining those.

794 P48: OK. Um, meeting versus group. A group is tied to the service structure. A meeting
795 is not.

796 R49: So, any alcoholics getting together is—

797 P49: Is a meeting. A meeting can be any two or more alcoholics together to have a
798 discussion. There's various formats you could use and it doesn't—whereas a group is
799 aligned, a group has service positions—a meeting might have service positions but they
800 don't have the committee structure service positions that a group does that ties them in
801 with the district, that ties them in with the area, that ties it in with the general service
802 office.

803 R50: So is that why the Bellingham meeting list includes meetings on the bottom, and—

804 P50: Those are meetings, and the other ones, the groups, are tied to the general service
805 structure.

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806 R51: OK. And so, when people take a meeting to someone in the hospital or something,
807 that's legitimate and you can do that and you can use the format, but that's different from
808 a group.

809 P51: Well, and it's different in another way. If you carry a meeting into detox or to a
810 hospital or to a persons home or to a penal institution, those meetings, you don't ask
811 people to sign in, you don't pass a hat because there's no expenses, and you could adopt
812 any format you wanted to adopt. Whereas with a group you adopt, you use the format that
813 the group has decided.

814 R51: So it's formalized in that way. I had a feeling it was along those lines but I wanted
815 to make sure I knew how you were using them. So, you're summer event is a group?

816 P51: It's a meeting—

817 R52: Oh right, sorry that's what I meant.

818 P52: We usually call it the Fireside meeting. I never read the pamphlets too closely.
819 Although this year he said he didn't change anything but the date, but he did put the
820 pamphlets we're reading, but he did say there's going to be hot water for coffee and
821 there's not going to be any coffee. I'm making almost two gallons of tea, that's my part.

822 R53: And it's medicine.

823 P53: That's right, but they don't know that.

824 R54: Some of them might (laughter).

825 P54: It doesn't make any difference. And it's fun, we discuss and we have all this food
826 and we have fellowship afterward. So it's a just a meeting. It's something that happens in
827 the summer.

828 R55: So you probably—I've heard people say the program is not the fellowship and it
829 sounds like you might agree with that but you would mean something different from what
830 they mean.

831 P55: I would, I would. Because what I think AA is is a spiritual fellowship. That, spiritual
832 fellowship defines all those facets that we've talked about. What I consider this is, it's an
833 informal meeting of my homegroup. And I just try to have something every year that we
834 can learn about the fellowship that we haven't discussed in our study groups.

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835 R56: And the learning—the learning is, I’m trying to sort of, encapsulate some of
836 this...so the learning is your, part of your principle of growth, and the program’s
837 principle of growth—you believe it is implicit in the program. But it’s also a means by
838 which you foster connection. It’s how people get closer to each other.

839 P56: I don’t say this to anybody, but having this meeting is part of my service work.

840 R57: Right. Ok. So connection is a product of working a real program?

841 P57: I think so, I think so. I do I see that in the people I sponsor, how connected they are.
842 And I take great joy in that. Um, I’m sure they take joy or at least laugh about some of
843 the things I do. Like the girl who said I ordered her to do something. I’ve been her
844 sponsor for almost fifteen years, and there’s only been two times I’ve ordered her to do
845 anything. And the first time I knew I was ordering her to do it—she was a little resistant.
846 And then, she finally did it and she saw why. And this one I was not aware I was ordering
847 her to do it, so she picked up an order where one was not meant to be. So, cause I don’t
848 think you get anywhere by ordering people. It was just a matter of her own safety.

849 [long pause]

850 R58: Any closing words before I take us off the record?

851 P58: I don’t, you know, I feel pretty cleaned out. I’ll probably think of something else
852 later, but that’s ok. One of the things I do think we need to work on is being inclusive.
853 And I think that there is a danger that we might not be. And I also see a danger in having
854 so many things that involve gambling. Because gambling can be an addiction. And why
855 should we have a gathering that’s supported by gambling. So why would we want to
856 encourage addictions or possible addictions. So that’s become a thing now I’m concerned
857 about. I won’t do anything about it because I’m not active in any of those things where
858 it’s going on, and I won’t participate in them, out of my own choice. But I think as a
859 fellowship we need to be careful about that. Because that is putting another source of
860 addiction right in front of somebody whom we know has addiction problems. But that
861 inclusiveness of not being so god-oriented, and I believe in god and I have my own
862 religious program, but we can’t make people feel funny because we’re talking about god.
863 We have to talk about spirituality.

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864 R59: mm-hmm. That—your focus on inclusiveness reminds me that I don't know if I got
865 a sense of what changed in your opinion regarding women's meetings. Because again, if
866 we start splitting everybody up and there's gotta be men's meetings and women's
867 meetings and gay and lesbian meetings then—

868 P59: We've got to be homogenous. We have to be a homogenous society—

869 R60: The emphasis is on being alcoholic.

870 P60: The emphasis is on being alcoholic, and also, on being well-rounded within the
871 fellowship. And I think if you stick to one kind of meeting all the time you're not being
872 well-rounded.

873 R61: So what changed for you—you said that you do see some value in women's
874 meetings now, what is that value?

875 P61: That value is for women who think like, I don't think of myself as a woman, I think
876 of myself as a human being. But for women who think of themselves as women, and who
877 have maybe, sexual abuse problems or something that makes them hesitate to go from a
878 woman into being a human being, those meetings are valuable for them. And I think
879 eventually, the ones who are growing will fly out to the fellowship.

880 R62: Well, because what you just mentioned was a sexual trauma history that they might
881 feel more comfortable and achieve growth in that safer environment, an environment that
882 feels safer to them? And then they would—your hope would be that once they feel safe
883 they could go elsewhere.

884 P62: Be homogenous, yeah. Because I think the true lessons we learn are lessons that
885 pertain to all human beings. Not just women, not just people who've been sexually
886 abused, but it's everyone no matter what their problems are. That's where we end up.
887 That's a good distinction. I have been working with a women's group to give them a
888 service structure. I've met with them twice and from what I've heard I'll probably be
889 meeting with them again, buck them up—you know, if you're gonna be a really good
890 group this is what you have to do.

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1

2

1 R1: Please talk about your experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience
2 working the steps with a sponsor. Feel free to share anything that you think will help me
3 understand what it was like for you to get sober as a woman in AA.

4 P1: So, basically just my story of getting sober? OK. Um, I didn't start drinking or using
5 any drugs as a kid. I was 22 years old, but by that time I was divorced and I had two
6 babies. I had two babies by the time I was 20, and um, uh, and I had probably finished
7 about, at that time about a year and half, maybe two years of college and a bunch of
8 different colleges because my husband taught at colleges. And um, it was 1967 like, the
9 summer of love and everybody my age was—you know, we didn't say partying in those
10 days, but you know, smoking weed basically and drinking beer and so I did those things.
11 There was something about it though that—I had been in a really violent marriage and I
12 never talked to anybody about that. And there were no like, battered women's shelters in
13 those days. And so I finally escaped from that basically, but I never—I'm sure even if I
14 look back on it now although I don't think those words were even being used yet—the
15 acronym PTSD wasn't even coined at that time because it was just the beginning of the
16 buildup in Vietnam. So um, but I was like, really happy and politically involved and all
17 those things that we did about that stuff. But I never got any help for what had just
18 happened to me, you know, four years of being beaten and brutalized and other things
19 too. So I just kind of, I thought that was over and stuffed it away. But I think that when I
20 picked up a drink and started smoking pot that it meant more to me than maybe it might
21 have, just because it was like relief. So you know, I really loved it and looked forward to
22 it, I was already really fixated on it even though I don't think it was a problem yet. So, I
23 got a little minimum wage job and I was supporting my kids and I got an opportunity to
24 go back to school, to nursing school which is what I had started in, and finish that degree.
25 And I had been just dying to go back to school and so I had the chance to do that. And
26 uh, I'd gotten married again and uh, so eventually I finished—I always say, after nine
27 years and two kids and two husbands, I got my nursing degree. And uh, it was what I had

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28 worked for so hard and I loved it and I wanted to do it. And so I started working at a
29 hospital. And for whatever reason, it was like some leftover Demerol, which you're
30 supposed to waste with another nurse as a witness and I took it home. And I loved that.
31 And I injected myself with it. So, that started a really insane, insane progression with
32 opiates. And it was only probably a couple years before I just crashed and burned, and I
33 did it at work. You know, this is the thing about addiction like, it caused me to lose things
34 I loved and had worked really hard for for years. So I was at work, and I was in a
35 blackout apparently, and I wrote some crazy stuff in the nurses notes in a patient's chart
36 and I don't remember what I wrote, they showed it to me the next day and I was like,
37 what's this? But what I wrote was, righteous hope to die junkie, help me grandfather. I
38 don't know how that happened. Somebody asked me, do you think that was a cry for
39 help? And I thought you know, I don't think so, because I really didn't want to get caught
40 because I knew I was going to be in huge trouble. So, um, long story short, the nursing
41 board ended up taking my license away from me.

42 R3: Wow. For a first offense.

43 P3: Yeah, they didn't have the program they have now, the WHPS program. And I was
44 seeing a psychiatrist because the hospital—actually different hospital because I was
45 changing hospitals trying to stop, trying to stop and I thought, well I'll get myself another
46 fresh start and this psychiatrist had me go into group therapy and it was, I don't know, it
47 was what I like to call the worried well. I mean, it wasn't to the extreme depths of what I
48 was going through and I couldn't tell anybody what I was up to because it was so awful
49 and I was so ashamed of myself and I knew that I was putting everything at risk and I just
50 couldn't stop. And um, he's the one who suggested that I go to this treatment center in
51 Seattle. It was called Family House and it was up on top of Queen Anne Hill. And it
52 was—it wasn't 12 step based and the people that started it came out of Daytop Lodge in
53 New York, I don't know if you know about Daytop Lodge and Daytop Village, but it's
54 basically like a peer-run thing, and it's highly confrontational. It's like Synanon. And I
55 was supposed to be in there for two years. And my kids came in too, there, it was not a
56 good environment because there was so much yelling, like right in your face yelling.
57 High confrontation and you couldn't talk about yourself because you had to stay right

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58 here [gestures with hands to personal space in front of her] and you were constantly
59 cleaning the house and it was a big mansion, it was a beautiful house and there were
60 probably 20 of us in there. And we were all young, I was in my 20's and so was
61 everybody else there, I think. And um, I had met this man, or, obviously I was divorced
62 from my second husband by then, that didn't last too long. And I met this man who was a
63 friend of my sister's, and she lived up in BC at the time, she and her husband, and she
64 wanted me to meet him and I was just going to go into this treatment center at the time
65 and she goes, he's really nice, he's 40 years old he's a school teacher and I thought—oh
66 my god, how boring, a school teacher, somebody who's 40 and, you know, I was 28 I
67 think, or 27. But, I did go up for the weekend to see her and he was like, crazy about me
68 immediately, you know, already talking about well, if we get married then I'll do this
69 with my house for the kids, kind of crazy. Then I went into Family House with my kids
70 and when I was in Family House you couldn't have any contact with anybody in the
71 outside world. I couldn't communicate with my parents or my family or anybody. They
72 just kept you. You couldn't look out the window, you couldn't have a watch, you
73 couldn't listen to the radio. You know? It was very...really pretty cultish.

74 R4: Yeah, that's the word that comes to mind.

75 P4: You couldn't have any money and you couldn't leave the house. Anyway. So, um.
76 After—I was supposed to be there two years, but after five months I escaped from there
77 in the middle of the night. And I told my kids who were like 8 and 9 at the time, or 7 and
78 8. I said, listen, I'm going to pick you up at school tomorrow but I'm not gonna be here
79 when you wake up. And they were like, good! We're getting out of here. So I left there in
80 the middle of the night and I walked down the hill somewhere close to the Seattle Center
81 and found a Denny's and I had two nickels. One of which my son had given me and I had
82 a nickel and I called that guy up in BC and he immediately came down and got me and
83 my kids and took us to Canada the next day. It was a lot easier going across the border in
84 those days! This was 1973, and um, you know until I got sober I always thought that was
85 a really romantic story, instead of an insane story. And uh, but anyway I lived with him,
86 and I was in the country illegally but nobody seemed to notice or care. My kids went to
87 school and eventually we, I think we got married and then told them that I was there and

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88 they were like, well you can't be here and I was like, well we are and I am, and they were
89 pretty cool about and were like, very well, we'll find a way—
90 R5: This was before homeland security!
91 P5: Oh yeah, you know, Canadians are very polite and nice. Anyway, we lived up there
92 and I didn't stay sober once I left Family House, but I wasn't doing opiates, so I thought
93 that was ok since that had been the real horrible thing, I thought. So, I was just basically
94 smoking weed and I did that like, all day every day. And um, just always. But you know,
95 we had a pretty decent life and had a lot of fun and he was a very good guy and he didn't
96 understand anything about addiction and I guess he didn't see it as a warning sign to go
97 pick up a woman that was escaping from a treatment center and he was actually a really
98 terrific enabler. He really was. And um, there was a time when we thought we would
99 move to Bellingham and move to the states because property was so expensive up there
100 and it was so cheap in Bellingham at the time. And so we did and we moved back down
101 here and we bought a five bedroom Victorian house overlooking the bay on Eldridge
102 Avenue for forty-two thousand dollars. Which seemed like a significant amount of
103 money. It wasn't as much as things cost in BC at the time. And I went to the nursing
104 board by myself, I didn't get an attorney or anything I just went there, had an
105 appointment and talked to them about getting my license back. And I told them, well I've
106 been through treatment, I didn't tell them I escaped from treatment. And I remember
107 them asking me well, what if this happens again? And I said, well I would certainly like,
108 let you know. And they, they were naïve like most people were and they gave me my
109 license back. And within a short period of time I went to work. I had had another baby
110 when I was in BC and so he was 2. And I went back, I was just going to work like two
111 shifts a week and I couldn't get a job in Bellingham at the time, so I worked in Cedro
112 Woolley at a little hospital there and within no time I was up to my old tricks, I don't
113 know, you know, it's kind of like you can't even recall the suffering and humiliation of
114 even a week or a month ago. I just thought, well I'll handle it differently—I don't even
115 remember having a thought about it. Before long, I was just back into the insanity, and
116 that went on—I worked there for two years and I worked in Bellingham, and I was just

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117 always like, on the edge and afraid, really afraid that I was going to get found out but I
118 couldn't stop.

119 [doorbell rang, short break]

120 R6: So you were working in Bellingham and Cedro Woolley—

121 P6: Right, and I was up to no good again. In fact at one point I was so desperate that I just
122 took a leave of absence from work and I told them it was something to with my son who
123 was a teenager and I needed to be there for him but, that wasn't really the truth but I just
124 wanted to get away from it. But I continued to smoke weed and drink and then the
125 drinking escalated. And uh—every day, on a daily basis. And then I finally went back to
126 work, I couldn't stay away from it, I got an opportunity to be the head nurse of—cause I
127 worked in labor and delivery, I worked with moms and babies—and I got an opportunity
128 to help start a birthing center which, ironically, is in the same place that the birthing
129 center is now, on the corner of Cornwall and Alabama. The women who started this one
130 now didn't know that that had been a birthing center so I went over and talked to them
131 and said, you can thank us for that parking lot you have! They were like yeah! That was
132 why we got this place! So I worked at the birthing center and that was ok but that was
133 only two years. And uh, let's see, then what happened. Then I went on unemployment
134 and I was like, oh goody! Unemployment, I've never done that before. But you know, I
135 mean, I—

136 R7: So that was a decision to like, quit working and drink full time? Or—

137 P7: Um, well, I was still drinking and smoking weed and stuff but I thought ok, so I don't
138 have to go to work, I can just coast on unemployment for a while but you know, you have
139 to go apply for jobs when you're on unemployment and I just, couldn't lie about that. So
140 I applied for jobs, but generally I was applying for jobs that I knew I wasn't suited for.
141 And uh, I finally had to go to St. Joe's, there aren't that many employers, and they called
142 me back and said, Oh P-! Come back! We're so happy, we want you! And I was just like,
143 oh no...so I think I had a little job before that—yeah, I worked for a local obstetrician for
144 a short period of time. It was so horrible there. It didn't work out, I won't go into that
145 whole story but, his receptionist really just made life hell for me and finally he said listen
146 you know, P- you're really excellent, I really appreciate you, but I have to let one of you

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147 go because she was just complaining about me with just nonsensical things and I was
148 always going to her saying listen, let's work this out between the two of us you know, we
149 don't have to get Rob involved and, you know. So he said, I've got to let one of you go
150 and she's been here the longest so it's going to be you but I'll give you a great
151 recommendation. So, that's when I got the unemployment, I guess, yeah. But then I had
152 to go back to the hospital and it was the same thing and I was just back in it, deeper than
153 ever.

154 R8: It sounds like part of your mind was trying to find a job that would kind of keep you
155 safe.

156 P8: Oh yeah.

157 R9: And that was conscious?

158 P9: Yeah, oh yeah. So I did go back to the hospital—I mean, I could have not worked at
159 all, but I was married to somebody who like, would never save any money, we always
160 lived on the edge. And I really needed to have some money because, the house was
161 falling down around us and that was his character defect, was giving lots of stuff away to
162 everyone so he could be mister generous, but meanwhile we were wearing rags and the
163 carpet was down to the burlap. So, um, I uh...yeah, so I went back to work there and—
164 oh, I'll tell you, when I was working at the birthing center I—I'm gonna back up a
165 minute. I had a lady who was going to deliver there and I was also teaching childbirth
166 classes and she was in the Lamaze class and we got to be kind of friends, and she would
167 say things like, well I'm an alcoholic and I would just cringe! Like, that's not something
168 you say out loud! You know? And so at one point she said, why don't you come to an
169 AA meeting with me and see what my life is about. And I don't know if she knew
170 anything about me or not but I did go, and I went to Dry Dock with her and it was a big—
171 there weren't that many meetings in town at that point and it was a big, booming group
172 and I really felt like, oh my god, they're talking my language. These people get it, like
173 these people understand what I'm going through. And I stayed sober while I was going
174 there for probably four months. And uh, felt good about that. Except that this woman who
175 was very beautiful, very charismatic, very talented, very artistic, she um, was always
176 making up something to do in some creative way. And she became a therapist with

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177 absolutely no credentials to do that. And this was back in the—when the big thing was
178 repressed memory and recovered memories and that whole thing. So anyway, I was in
179 one of her groups because I thought that was AA, I was new, I didn't know better. And I
180 can remember the oldtimers at Dry Dock muttering about, that's not AA, what the hell
181 are they doing over there. And I thought oh, they're just old, we're young and we've got
182 something advanced going on here. Anyway, it got really crazy with her. And uh, she
183 was trying to get people—I think people were coming up with stuff just to please her,
184 cause like, she sponsored a lot of women and uh, and uh, I kind of knew that was
185 happening and at one point she was telling people well, if you've been sexually abused—
186 and of course a lot of these women had been sexually abused because a lot of women in
187 recovery have been sexually abused, as children—and she said, well if you've been
188 sexually abused as children then you are an abuser yourself. So now we're going to go
189 into these repressed memories and find these memories of how you have sexually abused
190 children. So then they were coming up with memories of that, and one of them
191 unfortunately came up with this memory of how they had abused this woman's child
192 and—it hit the fan! And she called the cops, this woman was arrested, it was just this
193 insane, paranoid, crazy—and I backed away from it, I knew it was crazy. And I backed
194 away from AA at the same time because I kind of thought it was all the same thing. I
195 didn't know better, I didn't know that we don't have gurus in AA and that you know,
196 outside issues or anything like that. Because I hadn't wanted to get a sponsor, I hadn't
197 wanted to do the steps, because I knew it was going to be like, telling the truth and I
198 wasn't going to do that. I was never gonna do that, because nobody knew. So anyway,
199 fast forward a little bit, I'm back at the hospital—so, I knew about AA. But it didn't
200 occur to me to go back there.

201 R10: And you said that, when she talked about being an alcoholic that you had sort of an
202 internal cringe about, don't talk about that—was that because you knew on some level
203 that you were an alcoholic?

204 P10: Oh I knew that, I was never in denial about that.

205 R11: OK, so it was about protecting the—keeping up the facade.

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206 P11: Yeah. My denial was that, someday I'm gonna be able to fix this. Someday I will
207 stop. Because there would be—some days there would be a couple of days when I would
208 stop and I would immediately feel better about myself, like, oh my god, this is—I'm
209 gonna do this now. And it would only last maybe two days. So—and I was drinking all
210 night—after I went to AA that first time, when I left AA I never smoked weed again but
211 the drinking escalated tremendously. So I was like, drinking all night, and uh, I was—I
212 didn't want anybody at home to see me really drunk, although sometimes they would
213 wake up and just see it, so I kind of liked to just stay up all night where they were
214 sleeping and I would just drink and drink and drink and then when I'd go to work—well,
215 you can't go to work with alcohol on your breath and I did once, and they sent me home.
216 So I was like, well that's not going to work, because people can tell. So then I would just
217 use drugs while I was at work. But I had to just, do something. And I felt tremendously
218 guilty, tremendously guilty. Because I knew it was so wrong! But anyway in
219 November—and I was an atheist—but November, I was like not just an atheist but an in-
220 your-face atheist. I was a dues paying member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation
221 and I, you know, liked to argue about it. And I remember one time I was working in
222 Sedro Woolley and I drove home, it was about midnight, and I just felt suddenly so
223 panicky and so crazy, and I pulled the car over and I was like, in a cow pasture, I mean,
224 there were cows there—and I just got out of the car and I was like, screaming at the sky
225 saying, if you're so powerful, if you love me so much, why do you let me live like this?
226 And uh, I don't think that was really the right approach so I didn't really get any help
227 from that supposed prayer but um, in November of 1988 I was just at the end of my
228 rope—and I don't know why I didn't just quit work, go to AA, those options didn't really
229 occur to me, I've never been able to stop myself, somebody always had to step in and
230 stop me. And uh, my last drinks was at a little place downtown. And I didn't usually
231 drink with people, I usually drank by myself at home. But I was drinking with somebody
232 and I was arguing the nonexistence of god, over my last drinks. And the topic was
233 Satanism and I said, well, Satanism is foolish because you have to believe the corollary
234 which is god, and obviously there isn't a god, so the whole this is stupid. And uh, the next
235 morning, I don't know why, I just couldn't live like that a minute longer and I got down

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236 on my knees in my living room and I said, that, I don't know if there's anybody listening,
237 but if you're there I don't think you can fix this—I didn't think it was fixable—so, I'm
238 not asking you to fix this, I just can't be alone with it anymore. I'm just asking you for
239 comfort, I just need you to be with me, that's all I'm asking. So I said that, and then I
240 guess—oh, I said if you do this for me, then I promise that I will live the rest of my life
241 for you. And while I'm saying that, there's a voice in my head going, what the hell are
242 you saying? You don't know how to do that? Are you going to go be a missionary or
243 something? But that's what I said! That's what came out of my mouth. And um, I go into
244 work that day and the director of nurses calls me into her office and she says to me—
245 because there had been another incident that I barely remembered, but it was where I was
246 like, really loaded and they couldn't find me. Because I was holed up in some bathroom.
247 And I think I had nodded off for quite a long time, you know with this tourniquette
248 around my arm and they couldn't find me. And stuff was heating up out there and they
249 were really busy and they needed somebody and I was nowhere to be found and I
250 couldn't explain it. Anyway, she called me into her office and she said, P—, we think you
251 have a problem. And I just started to cry. And then she said to me, well you're a good
252 nurse. Because I had never gotten a bad review in my entire career, ever, as far as
253 nursing, not one single criticism of anything. And she said, but, there's help if you want
254 it. And I was like, I do! I want it! But St. Joseph's hospital had a recovery center at that
255 time, an inpatient recovery center and so was like, ok well let's go and she just took me
256 down there and put me in there! Like, nobody in my family knew where I was, or
257 anything. And it was like, there I was. And I was just—my basic thought was, I was
258 really ashamed, I didn't know what was going to happen, I didn't know if I was going to
259 go to prison or not because I had seen pictures in the paper of nurses being led out of St.
260 Joes in handcuffs. So, that was my big fear was that I was going to be in huge legal
261 problems. And um, what I didn't know until years later was that there had been this law
262 enacted and it came into play on October 31st 1988, and I was confronted on November
263 the 7th, 1988. Which was establishing the WHPS program which was, I want to say
264 amnesty, but it was a monitoring program that you could go into in order to save your
265 license. And there were a lot of hoops you had to jump through for three years, nowadays

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266 it's five years. But um, I was offered that. So um, but I didn't know that at the time. And
267 I thought to myself when I was in there, I'm going to do this, I'm gonna be honest like
268 they said—cause I remembered about AA, and the treatment center was 12 step focused.
269 And I thought, I'm gonna—I know about this, and I'm gonna just do it now, whatever
270 happens. And I'm gonna put myself in the—I'm gonna just surrender to it. So if I go to
271 prison I'm gonna do it in prison, whatever happens, because I just can't live like this
272 anymore. And uh—I'm all in. So uh, they had somebody from the state pharmacy board
273 come and talk to me about what I'd been up to and I answered every question he had, I
274 told him the truth. And then that night I thought to myself, you know what, people who
275 are not addicts don't even know the questions to ask. There's more. But I answered
276 everything truthful so maybe that's good enough. And uh, I talked to my counselor about
277 it and she said well, we'll get him back. So he came back and I told him everything. And
278 somebody said to me—Nancy K who was the head nurse at the recovery center said,
279 well, do you want a lawyer to go in there with you? Then I got scared and I said, what do
280 I need a lawyer for? And she said, well I don't know, I just am asking, you have the right
281 to have one and I thought, no, I'm not going to have a lawyer. I don't want this to be
282 adversarial. I want to be...I want it all to be off of me. So, I would never presume to give
283 anyone legal advice, but that worked really well for me. And then I got to go into the
284 WHPS program and I had to go to this—and I didn't work then. I wasn't going to be a
285 nurse anymore I thought, it's too dangerous for me. So I'm just not gonna do it. I was
286 going to voc rehab and they were like, what do you need us for, you have a profession.
287 And I was like, listen, I have this handicap, I'm an alcoholic, I'm a drug addict, it's too
288 risky for me and I need something else. They were like, OK, and I started the process of
289 testing but I—you know I didn't work for which I'm really grateful today because I got to
290 go to lots of meetings. And I was profoundly depressed. And I was afraid to like, take any
291 medication—I don't know if anybody offered it to me, but I was afraid I would abuse it,
292 because I abused everything. And uh, so I just stayed depressed, and I felt a little bit
293 better when I was in meetings so I just went to meetings, all the time. And uh, I was
294 required to go to three a week and get a slip signed, but I went to like, 7 to 10 meetings a
295 week. And uh, I...um, I had a train of thought, I don't remember what it was. So anyway,

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296 I got—and I went to NA too in the beginning, for probably six months and I just
297 thought—I really didn't find good examples of recovery in NA. And it's kind of been like
298 that in this town. I don't know why exactly, I mean I think NA is strong other places. But
299 um, I found a sponsor in AA, who I loved and admired. And I just thought I better
300 concentrate on one book, and one program and one sponsor. So, I stayed in AA. And I
301 didn't really seem to need—I mean, I qualified as an alcoholic for sure, I mean, I drank
302 like a pig. So I don't need to qualify myself as an alcoholic-addict, which to me seems
303 kind of redundant. So, also I think keeps people—this is what I tell sponsees, is you need
304 to identify with us, but we need to identify with you too. And if you need to insist that
305 you're somehow unique then some of these oldtimers, or maybe not oldtimers, who are
306 strictly alcoholic are going to think, well I can't really help that person because I don't
307 have that experience. Then you miss out on something you might have been able to use.
308 So yeah, I just apply AA to everything in my life and I haven't found it necessary to go to
309 different groups. If I did find it necessary I would go. It's worked for me just to do that.
310 And uh, yeah, so I wasn't happy. I didn't really get happy until probably around two
311 years. Something happened to me where—it was about the time I finished the ninth step
312 and uh, and you know I finished it. I didn't hang onto anything. I wasn't going to hang
313 onto anything or be unwilling to go anywhere, I was just like...AA soldier, showing up
314 for duty. Yeah, so something happened to me.

315 R12: When you finished your amends?

316 P12: Yeah. I don't know I mean, they say that, you know. What we call colloquially the
317 promises are the ninth step promises. And that was exactly how that happened for me.

318 And uh, yeah. So, um...and then I met S- when I was going on three years of sobriety.

319 And—

320 R13: So you were still married at that time?

321 P13: I was just—I had left my husband. I felt like at home then that I—cause he was like,
322 he did have his own demons. I mean, I'll never say he wasn't a good guy, because he
323 was. But he was not supportive of my recovery at all. And now when I look back on it I
324 think he kind of liked the fact that I was dependent...on him. Because he would sort of
325 like, do things to sort of sabotage it. And I was like, nope, this is life or death for me, you

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326 can ask me, why are you going to that meeting, all you want, but I'm going. Finally I just
327 felt like I couldn't breath. And I moved out and I lived in a house which is really odd, but
328 I lived in the same house that I live in now. But it was owned by this woman named N-
329 who's in the program, but she rented out rooms, to people, and I rented a room from her.
330 And um, years later Steve ended up buying that house, so we live in that house now. And
331 I never think about that unless I'm telling my story, I never like, lie up in my bed and
332 think, oh, this is where I was in my little single bed with my suitcase and dresser, you
333 know, like a little monk in a cell. You know, it came down to very bare bones living in
334 there. But it was okay. That's when I really got the third step, when I really, really got it.
335 And uh, yeah so, S- and I got together about three years, and he had ten years at the time
336 which impressed me—although now I know that's not necessarily, doesn't necessarily
337 mean anything. But he's really—I remember one of the things he said to me was, we
338 were talking about drinking and he said, if you go back out I'm not going with you. And I
339 think that is the most romantic thing he has ever said to me and I thought, I love that
340 about him. Because he loves his sobriety more than he loves me. Because I can count on
341 this guy, you know? Anyway, we've been together for quite a long time, 23 years,
342 and...almost. And I've just stayed in AA and that's been, you know, I know it works
343 because I didn't do anything else. I don't have a problem with other people doing
344 whatever they need to do, but I didn't do anything else. I did AA. And I say I was—I was
345 content not to be happy. I was used to being unhappy, and just the fact that I wasn't a
346 slave to alcohol anymore, and drugs, was enough. I didn't really expect to get happy. And
347 I didn't really talk much. I mean, I was kind of—I think god struck me dumb, really,
348 because I am a talker. And I also use that, those uh, verbal gymnastics and intellect and
349 my great knowledge of literature to like, don't look at the man behind the curtain! You
350 know, but I had a sponsor who didn't fall for that, she'd be—that's all very well, but
351 we're talking about step 2. You know? And she would just—so, I had the perfect sponsor
352 for me. And I didn't socialize with anybody in early sobriety. She tried to get me to do all
353 these things, hang out, I just, I was really into the program not so much into the
354 fellowship for a couple years.
355 R14: What changed then?

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356 P14: Um, I think when I moved out of my—when I moved away from my husband, I
357 don't know, it happened about that time when I think that I knew that I really needed to
358 depend on women, you know?

359 R15: And it sounds like at that time you were—you had encouragement from your
360 sponsor. But you also were able to reach out at that point, calling women and...

361 P15: Yeah it started out that way—I was really uncomfortable doing it. I remember
362 sitting in meetings and they'd say well, you have to change all your friends and I'd think,
363 lucky me, cause I don't have any friends! I don't have to give any up. Cause I didn't, I
364 wasn't connected to anybody at all. I was just so completely isolated and liking it that
365 way. My sponsor was the one who told me I had to get an answering machine. Cause I
366 just wouldn't answer the phone and then I wouldn't know who called me and wouldn't
367 owe them a callback or anything. This was before any—this was before cell phones or
368 anything. I was like, aw rats! And I said to her, well then I'm gonna have to call them
369 back! And she said, exactly. Got to establish some kind of network here like, what if
370 you—what if I'm not available. And what are the chances that you'll call them if you've
371 never called them before. Pretty much zero, so. So...and that's been a real lifesaver for
372 me. I mean, I have men friends too and men have helped me too, but it's really a lifesaver
373 to have those women.

374 R16: What's valuable about those relationships? That might sound like a dumb question,
375 but I'm curious about that...how is it a life saver?

376 P16: Well, I think there's a difference in how men and women approach things. I don't
377 think I'm sexist in saying that. And maybe it is as a consequence of sexism that men are
378 conditioned to be one way and women are conditioned to be another way. But the fact is
379 that they are generally speaking—of course there are lots of exceptions—but men,
380 basically if you have a problem, they want to solve it for you. They're really into solving
381 it and they're pretty good at that. But women will listen to you. They'll listen to me, and I
382 can then come up with what I need to do to solve it, with that kind of help. They don't
383 need to—they don't necessarily need me to be fixed, I think. You know? I think they're
384 ok, more ok if I'm just kind of floundering for a while.

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385 R17: Sounds like...real, sort of companionship, instead of a productive relationship...or
386 something.

387 P17: Yeah...yeah, yeah. So there's things I talk to my women friends about that I don't
388 talk to my husband about it, and he would be fine about it, but I don't have to. One would
389 think—you know, I've been divorced three times when Steve and I got together, right? I
390 mean, I didn't have a good record of forming a true partnership with another human
391 being. And I thought to myself—I mean, I was 40—in my mid-forties when I got
392 together with him and I thought this is done. Nursing is done, relationships are done, I'm
393 not gonna have that anymore and I'm ok with that. And um, my nursing was given back
394 to me—I feel like everything that I have, everything that I have received in sobriety has
395 been a gift, not something I have worked on. I mean, I really believe in steps six and
396 seven, I don't fix myself, that something else can help me, I just have to like, get out of
397 the way. And uh, so I, what happened was, I was coming up on a year of sobriety I guess,
398 or two years, something like that, and this doctor called me up out of the blue, and I think
399 I had run into the woman that I had started birthcare with who was also married to a
400 doctor, and she was a nurse and she asked me how I was doing and I said I was doing
401 well. I had gone up to the hospital and had made my amends to the nurses and the
402 director of nurses who was my supervisor up there and I was really terrified to do that—I
403 mean, they had known all ready, but to go up there and face it was, it was, I'd made
404 amends to my father who I'd hated and that relationship was so much better, I made
405 amends to my ex husband who was so awful—for my part, cause you know, and that, that
406 helped, he ended up making amends to me too. So anyway, I'd gotten through that, this
407 obstetrician called me and said my nurse is going to have a hystorectomy, she's going to
408 be gone for six weeks, do you want to come work for me for those six weeks? I thought, I
409 didn't ask for this, it just came out of the blue, and I'm not going to be exposed to
410 anything scary there, it's an obstetrician's office...and after that, not too long after that,
411 maybe a few more months, a family practice doc I had know because he delivered babies,
412 called me up—I ran into his wife and she asked me how I was and I said, you know, I'm
413 doing better. And I also, I had sent flowers up to the hospital on my one year anniversary,
414 to the two colleagues of mine who had been the ones that turned me in and I just thanked

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415 them for saving my life and probably some other people's lives too. And um, cause they
416 were really mad at me. In fact when I was treatment somebody thought it was a good idea
417 to have them come down and confront me in treatment—maybe it was good for them! It
418 was not good for me. It was not the right time for me, I was completely raw and
419 completely exposed and I just had to sit there and listen to them. They were angry. I don't
420 blame them for being angry, it didn't seem like uh—it didn't seem very therapeutic for
421 someone who was in treatment. Anyway, this guy, this other doctor called me who was,
422 called me up and asked me if I would want to work for him. And I was doing all this
423 other stuff with vocational rehab and I thought, you know, this is not something I'm
424 trying to make happen, this is just appearing to me. So I went in and talked to him and I
425 said Jim, listen, you know my history, you know, I can't be around any narcotics. I don't
426 want to have possession of the narcotics keys, I don't even want to know where they're
427 kept. I don't want anything to do with it. Like, I will ask one of the other nurses here if I
428 have to give somebody something for a migraine or whatever else comes up here. To do
429 it for me, and I'll do something for them in exchange, but—and he said to me, well, P-,
430 probably you're going to have to but, you know, that's ok for now. And I said another
431 thing is, if you ever have any suspicion of me, or even if you don't, and you just feel like
432 doing it, you can ask me to take a UA, just as protection for me. Even though I'm doing
433 UA's for the WHPS program now and they—random ones. Well actually, when I started
434 in the WHPS program I had to go up to the treatment center every other day and pee in a
435 cup. And they would choose which ones they would test, but I had to go up there every
436 other day and pee. Now they have a computerized system where people just check in on
437 the computer which is—I'm not sure it's as good, there's a lot of wiggle room, you never
438 know, you could get two that were close together, but. And I ended up in that group for
439 three years which was helpful to me because, um, I could really talk about stuff that I
440 didn't want to talk about in a meeting. I didn't want to scare somebody when they're
441 thinking, god, my grandma's in the hospital! You know, so um, that's what was good for
442 me, was an opportunity to just talk about that stuff, and I ended up running that group
443 then, some years later. I did that for quite a while too.

444 R18: What is the—what is the acronym you're saying?

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445 P18: W, H—Washington health professional services, I guess, so what happens is if a
446 nurse is somehow impaired and it comes to the attention of the board she can, he or she
447 can be referred to the WHPS program and not have anything come up in your license.
448 R19: I was, I'm familiar with the Pennsylvania model, and I just wanted to know...
449 P19: And some states don't have it.
450 R20: So that comes up in, with situations where you're at the mercy of your
451 administrators?
452 P20: And the board just takes your license. So...
453 R21: Well, this is an aside, but I remember that the numbers, the numbers are higher in
454 nursing than other professions.
455 P21: Oh I believe that, I totally believe that. One of the things I learned when I was in
456 treatment, was, Dr. - was the doctor when I was going to treatment and he was giving me
457 a physical because I was going to treatment and there was a little student nurse in the
458 room, the chaperone person, and he said to me, I might have been—well, I don't know if
459 I was the first nurse they had in treatment. I know I was the first one they had in WHPS
460 because it was only a week old. And he said, well you know, 80 percent of nurses are
461 adult children of alcoholics, and I went, "what?!?" and the little student nurse when,
462 "What?!?!" We looked at each other like, you? Me? Yeah, ok. So I talked to J- S- about
463 that, who was is retired now, but she was the one who started the program, she also had a
464 substance abuse problem but she was the one who started the program here in
465 Washington. And um, an uh, in fact they made a movie about her and I think Cheryl
466 Tiegs played her in the movie, I don't think I ever saw the movie but, you know, it was
467 like, when this was just, it hadn't been addressed before. She was tough though. Very
468 though, which you need to be with nurses because nurses think they know something.
469 R22: Well, they're used to crisis it sounds like. I mean you've talked about, in your own
470 story there's uh, a bad relationship with your dad, an abusive husband, chaos and drama
471 all the time, so you're used to coping in a way not all people are.
472 P22: Right. And it seems not that abnormal. Um, so I asked her about it, the doctor said
473 it's 80 percent! She said, oh I wouldn't be surprised if it was even higher, maybe 85
474 percent. I was like, wow, why is that? And she said you know, I think we are trying to fix

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475 what we couldn't fix back then. And I thought, you know nurses are definitely fixers.
476 And then the next thought I had was, no wonder it's so crazy to work with nurses because
477 it's a bunch of untreated alanons is what's going on. So everybody is a control freak,
478 nobody will let go, everybody's running on fear that it's not gonna be ok so they have to
479 be in control. And that caretaking comes out of fear, you know, it's not so much out of
480 the goodness of my heart that I want to give to you, which I think we feel—I mean, I
481 definitely feel that, it's why I went into nursing. But also I think it's an attempt to try to
482 fix something. Yeah. So then I worked for, I did work for J- R- and Family Health
483 Associates and I never thought I'd want to work in an office cause I was addicted to the
484 drama and trauma of like, those specialty units like ICU, CCU, ER, labor and delivery,
485 cause all hell can break loose and you better know what you're doing or people are gonna
486 die! And you know, I really got adrenaline rush from that. So here I am in a doctor's
487 office and I'd think, oh, a chimpanzee could do this job. You know, take people's blood
488 pressure, change the paper on the exam table, you know, I don't know. But actually, it, I
489 actually ended up finding it really gratifying. It was good for me in a couple reasons—I
490 didn't have to work nights, I didn't have to work holidays, there wasn't that insanity. I
491 had a regular schedule and a good nights sleep. And I got to know people over time, over
492 years. So I'd watch the little kids that I gave their baby shots to, grow up and go into high
493 school. You know, I knew their grandparents, I knew their parents, people trusted me, I
494 had really, real relationships with them. So that part I really like, and the nursing comes
495 in in the judgment, like, especially when you're on the phone with people. Like, who
496 needs to be seen now, who can wait. And who maybe doesn't need to be seen now but
497 you can tell in their voice that they're afraid so you're gonna see them anyway. That kind
498 of thing, you know.

499 R23: So it was meaningful work that saw you through a lot of the years of your sobriety,
500 I mean, not just early sobriety but all the way up through like, 15, 18 years.

501 P23: Yeah, so. You know. And I have to say, I didn't really miss working at the hospital
502 at that point. There were certain things I missed about it, but I didn't miss the—and it's
503 still like that. It's always been like that. I'm sponsoring a nurse now who's uh, wondering
504 if she'll ever get to be a nurse again, sort of like I was. But it's always like that, they're

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505 always short-staffed. Because they don't let themselves be anything other than short-
506 staffed because if there's ever kind of lull, then they call you off, so that those who are
507 left are short! And they're just scrambling and running their butts off. You're always just
508 kind of on the edge of chaos. You know, I remember thinking too, back to this nurse
509 business, I asked somebody from the hospital one time—back when I was stealing drugs
510 from the hospital, I used to think, I was just amazed that they don't have us do UA's, I
511 mean, I'm glad they don't because I would be in big trouble, but why—they do at Intalco
512 or Cherry Point or any of these other places where safety is a concern and like, safety is
513 really a concern here! And they say they're so, all about safety. And I asked them like,
514 why don't you do that? And he said well, we'd have to fire like, half of our staff. And so,
515 that's ok with you then, to just have impaired nurses? Oh my god! And nurses are very
516 hard to treat. I've had two treatment professionals tell me that they thought nurses were
517 the hardest, yeah, to treat. And you know when I was in, when I did that nurses support
518 group, of course people had to go to that, but they were a little more grateful. And I used
519 to remind them, you know, didn't used to be this WHPS program, you know? I'll tell you
520 my story because you're lucky! You're so lucky! You should concentrate on feeling
521 some gratitude instead of bitching about it! But um, you know. So, but I, a lot of them
522 were resistant to—let me put it this way. The ones who did AA did well. The ones who
523 didn't, didn't do very well. You know, three of them, just in the time I was there, are
524 dead. So, but there was just lots of—I think there was just a big huge fear of letting go. I
525 mean, you've got the addiction part, but you've also got the codependency part. You
526 know, yeah. Oh yeah, And you know nurses—my friend who works I the ICU there,
527 she's not an alcoholic but she's married to an alcoholic, to a good friend of mine in the
528 program and she said to me, have you ever noticed, P-, how many nurses like, end up
529 with people who are like—men who are losers? Like, half the time they don't even have
530 jobs! And I started thinking about it and I was like, yeah, this is—it's kind of true, you
531 know, these guys who hook up with a woman who is like, smart and capable, and these
532 guys just think it's like, kind of ok, cause I mean, it's that caretaker thing, I don't know.
533 R24: And it's familiar?
534 P24: Yeah, yeah.

535 R25: Mm. Well, I have two things that I want to come back to a little bit, in whatever
536 order whatever direction you want to go. I'm curious if you ever did address your PTSD,
537 and how, and I want to hear about how you sponsor.

538 P25: Ok. I don't think I ever directly—no, well you know, I did do some counseling. Uh,
539 well, Steve and I went to counseling for a short period of time with an agenda. We
540 wanted to learn how to fight better. We didn't expect that we weren't going to disagree,
541 or even have like, fights. Because we're both alcoholics and neither one of us likes to be
542 told what to do. And neither one of us were gonna like—cause, not gonna go anywhere.
543 Like, we're in for the duration. No matter what, we're staying. So, we've gotta work this
544 out. Just so that we're not up all night. So, and so we did that and went, actually to a
545 couple different things. One was like, a seminar, and one was with a therapist. And then
546 um, when I left my husband, my sponsor Lucia—who's in town again, yay! She's gonna
547 come Thursday night, she's one of the founders of the Fairhaven group, I love her to
548 death. Anyway, she said to me, I'm not a marriage counselor. She's not one of these
549 sponsors that would give you advice about stuff she didn't really know about. Like, if I
550 had things about my kids, she didn't have any kids so she'd say, well I suggest you go
551 talk to Carol who has kids, or somebody else who has kids. You know? Talk to
552 somebody else who's a mother, because I don't really qualify to give you any direction
553 about that. So, that's what she said about that, she said, you know I think you guys
554 probably should go to marriage counseling. But my husband wouldn't go. So I kind of
555 went on my own, which was futile as far as marriage counseling. Doesn't work that way.
556 So, it was good. I don't know that it directly addressed PTSD, and I kind of stopped
557 going to her after it came to this stuff about like, repressed memories and I was like, I'm
558 outta here. I'm not getting sucked into that insanity. So, no I don't think I ever really did.
559 I think uh, and whether or not it's still...influences me, I don't know that I could answer
560 that. I want to say that no, it doesn't. I feel really recovered and I feel able to—I don't
561 live in fear, and I don't have to like, control.

562 R26: It sounds like part of your process was learning how to let people support you. And
563 finding the right people to do that...so, differentiation on some level. So maybe it got—

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564 P26: Yeah, I feel very supported and also, one of the most valuable things I learned in
565 recovery, talking about forming a true partnership with another human being, is to let him
566 be. Cause I think so often, uh, I think women especially think—well, V- said to me one
567 time, he said, a man will look at a woman and here's his reaction, here's what it looks
568 like, it's like, glong! [pops head forward with neck rigid, bugs eyes out] That's about all
569 it is. And a woman will look at a man and she'll think, hm, I could do something with
570 that...[laughter]

571 R27: There's potential there!

572 P27: Yeah! So, what I found out after all these many divorces and no skills whatsoever,
573 well, one of the things I did was when Steve and I went to counseling together, if I started
574 getting up into some fear or whatever, I wouldn't even talk to him about it, I would talk
575 to Lucia, my sponsor about it. I went to the women about it. And I just told the truth
576 about myself. I was like, I have this jealousy, and I feel like it's so ugly. And I wouldn't
577 talk to him about it or try to get him to behave differently because he was just being the
578 friendly guy that he is! And he had lots of women friends, I mean, he told me that when
579 we met—he said I've got lots of women friends, men friends—and he was just being like,
580 cause he can be very charming and women were drawn to him, and I could see that—in
581 fact they would tell me that! They'd say, oh, S- L, nobody's ever been able to get next to
582 him, yeah, we all tried! They said! So I thought, you know, it was a very old feeling of
583 jealousy brought on by, I think my first marriage where my husband had gotten one of his
584 student's pregnant and had like, 30 affairs that he told me about that I knew of, and
585 uh...So, I would just talk to her about it about my feeling of jealousy and how that was
586 my fear and that I needed to ask for help with that. But it really wasn't his responsibility
587 to fix this. I mean, if he had been doing something out of line, then—but he really wasn't
588 actually. And so when I got more ok with things, and I just concentrated on adoring him,
589 that worked really well. He really responded to that, because I think that's what—I really
590 think that's what, when I talk to women about that I say, I think really what most women
591 want is to be cherished—and I think maybe men want that too! And it might look a little
592 different or something, they might interpret some things a little differently, but really
593 what they want is to be adored. That works really well. And then you know, they change

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594 to like, really wanting to please us. You know? And I do things in my relationship where
595 like, Steve's job is to wash the floors and every time he does it he has to say, do you
596 notice anything different? Whereas, when I scrub the toilet I don't come in and go, hey,
597 did you notice anything? And I could say, and I would say in the past, hey, you live here
598 too. There's no reason you shouldn't do that, I don't think you necessarily need any extra
599 praise about that. But instead I'll say, oh honey! It looks like a white tornado came
600 through here, I'm so pleased! I just make a big fuss about it, which makes him want to do
601 it more! So maybe that's manipulation, I guess? But it's also like, you know, it's the
602 same thing you would do with your child, you really praise them for things.

603 R28: Positive reinforcement?

604 P28: Yeah, yeah, rather than negative. You know what I mean? And I don't really
605 criticize him. Unless, I mean, there's times when something's really not ok with me. But
606 I don't do it a lot. Because it just doesn't work. It's destructive. So, yeah.

607 R29: So you were able to sort of heal, and change how you interact with people and relate
608 with them?

609 P29: It's very different. And how I relate to the world. It's very, it's completely different,
610 you know. And it's just, I think it has to do with just, thoroughly working an AA program
611 which affects everything in my life. Which doesn't mean I don't still have vestiges of
612 whatever those fears are. I mean, like I have fears sometimes about like talking to, I mean
613 I'm a pretty like—a woman who can carry myself well and make things happen, and
614 every once in a while things will come up and he's like, well you need help with your
615 computer like, why don't you call the—and I'm like, oh, will you call them for me, eh, I
616 can't, it's too scary! Like, I'm capable of that, but I want you to do it. Get somebody over
617 here to fix it, cause, they'll say words that I don't understand, and then I—then what? I
618 don't know what—then they'll probably explain them to me, but you know. So, I'm not
619 saying that has gone away completely, but I pretty much have trust and faith in the world
620 and the people in it.

621 R30: So, what does your program look like today?

622 P30: Um...

623 R31: Maintenance, you know? What do you do?

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624 P31: I...go to meetings regularly, that's never stopped. Um, I'm in Arizona half the year
625 so I have a home group down there. I go to other meetings down there too. That was a
626 little bit of a change because of course, it's not Whatcom county AA which I think is so,
627 has so much emphasis on the traditions and service, and a lot of places don't know that,
628 don't know much about it and don't really pay attention to it. And they seem to stay sober
629 and they love their AA meetings, but I really love that about here. The dimension of
630 knowing greater AA, and um...

631 R32: Being tapped into the broader structure—

632 P32: Yeah, the big picture. And the history and all that stuff. Um, but it works down there
633 and they're not connected to anything much, but they're—it's older people, been sober a
634 long time, most of them. Although we have our 70 year-old newcomers come in and
635 they're like, so grateful. It's pretty amazing.

636 R33: But you have—you do identify a regional difference.

637 P33: Yeah, oh yeah.

638 R34: Have you gone to AA anywhere else that you can compare to?

639 P34: I've been to lots of AA meetings around the country and Europe, I've been to lots of
640 AA meetings. That's like, here?

641 R35: No, I mean, to support the—I agree from my experience that there's something
642 distinctive regionally, in a lot of places, but certainly here.

643 P35: Yeah, so I don't know that I've—we spent a summer in Alaska when we were
644 working on a movie up there. We found a group that was comfortable for us. It was
645 basically a big book group. That's usually what we look for, what I look for when we
646 travel anywhere you know, we're gonna look on the schedule and go oh, here's a big
647 book meeting, let's go to that. That's generally what I try to do. Or some kind of a study
648 meeting. Cause I just like to hear people share about their experience with that—

649 R36: With the steps—

650 P36: With the steps, yeah, and the book. I just like to hear what they have to say about
651 that. I'm not so much interested in—my boss was mean to me today—I don't care, you
652 know. I don't. I've changed since I was a newcomer, every meeting was great, everybody
653 was wise, everything they said was helpful to me, it didn't matter to me. I'm like, maybe

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654 a little more discriminating, I think there's a place for those meetings and people should
655 go to them. You know, I mean, unless they need help and support. You know, I'll go to
656 meetings that are fine, you know cause they need some help, but I'm not really going
657 there to get fed. Although, I'm surprised sometimes, but you know, a lot of times I'll do
658 that.

659 R37: Where do women's meetings fall for you on that spectrum? Have you ever found
660 them to be valuable?

661 P37: Umm, I think the women's meetings are better now in Bellingham than they were. I,
662 well I helped to start the Women on Wednesday meeting, it was called Stepsisters,
663 originally. And it was Polly Pistle, myself and Malina, and then Martha got involved. She
664 wanted to have a women's meeting at the same time as SOS, for like, maybe people who
665 came in from the county, they could come in as a couple—

666 R38: Because SOS is a men's meeting.

667 P38: Yeah. And she said to me, what do you think about this? And I said, Molina, I will
668 support it and be on board with it if two conditions are met. One, I want it to be a closed
669 meeting, and two, I want it to be a big book study. We don't have any big book studies,
670 any women's big book studies. Because my experience with women's meetings at that
671 time was that they kind of devolved into exactly that, meetings of women. Not AA
672 meetings. And I needed an AA meeting. Cause I have lots of women time where we can
673 just talk. So she, so P- P- was like, yeah! That's exactly what we should do we'll just go
674 through the book. So that's what we did. I think they had kind of gotten away from that,
675 they were still doing the big book, but then the the next time I came back to town I think
676 they were like, reading the stories. And I was like, that's not what we were going to do!
677 That wasn't the group conscience! But, you guys are running it now, you've got your
678 own group conscience, you've got to do what you're gonna do. That meeting almost went
679 under and Kim kind of saved it. And she was, we were kind of talking by email a lot
680 when I was in Arizona and I was kind of telling her the history of the meeting, and what
681 the original concept had been and you know, that kind of thing. And she helped get it
682 back up and going, so. I like Women in the Solution but I almost never go to that. I think
683 if I were going to go to a meeting on Tuesday nights I'd probably go to Into Action.

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684 Nothing wrong with that meeting, I just have really good friends at Into Action that I've
685 known for a really long time, and I like the format better. So, there's nothing wrong with
686 what they do there. And when I've been there I enjoyed it. But, for one thing, I was
687 brought up not to volunteer to talk. So, and that's just me—
688 R39: By your sponsor?
689 P39: It was like, basically it's a spiritual practice to wait to be called on. And you know,
690 if you really have something to say then you'll be called on, and if you don't, then you
691 need to listen. And I really believe that I have not gotten well by going to AA and talking
692 about myself. It's not group therapy. I get well by listening, and I try to help others by
693 sharing. And I tell my sponsees that too, if you share in a meeting you should be thinking
694 about the newcomer. Even if there's not an identified newcomer there, you don't know—
695 there could be somebody back from a relapse and you don't know. You share about the
696 solution in your life, for somebody else. And you listen for yourself. So, I just, I had that
697 realization at a meeting in Ireland, I guess, it was in Dublin and they had this one group,
698 it was like the first group in Europe and it was great, and then they had this other group
699 that was a lot of, maybe younger people, and by that I don't mean real young, but people
700 would volunteer to talk. And that used to happen here, in some of the open discussion
701 meetings, people would kind of step on each other, to volunteer to talk. And I sat there
702 the whole meeting thinking—Steve will not volunteer. He absolutely will not, even if
703 he's in a little meeting with five of his friends—you've got to call on him, he just won't.
704 But um but I will, I mean, it's like, when in Rome, sometimes you have to because that's
705 their group conscience. But the trouble is, sometimes—that just leads to too much
706 thinking for me, cause I sat there thinking, I think know that I have something to say, but
707 is it worthwhile? Should I just let them talk? It was just, thinking about me the whole
708 time! And I couldn't really listen! I got into too much thinking about self. That's why I
709 don't really like it. You know. So...so that's the problem with WITS for me, is that that's
710 part of their thing. So like when they say, does anybody else have a solution? I'm
711 thinking to myself well, do I have one? Is it good enough? Would somebody else be
712 better? I could certainly talk on this issue, I can talk on anything! But am I the one to do
713 it? Or, is this gonna look like, bad, because I haven't been here for months and suddenly

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714 I'm telling people? I don't know! You know, so...yeah. So um, I'll tell you what
715 women's meetings have been really valuable to me is, when we've had women's retreats
716 at the Fairhaven Group. Those have been really great because I really get to know people
717 over that weekend. And people that I haven't really gotten to spend a lot of time with,
718 prior to that? You know what I mean? Cause we all have our own certain friends, but I
719 like to be able to know all of them and spend some time with people I haven't known that
720 well.

721 R40: You know, it's so funny because I find myself trying to um, I'm not trying to elicit
722 anything in particular. I don't have an opinion about women's meetings or women in AA
723 that I'm trying to prove, um, but even when you say like, that these women's retreats are
724 so valuable—so most women's meetings, well, meetings in general, have women's
725 retreats. So somewhere we have an instinctive sense that like, there is something to be
726 gained from women supporting each other, or men supporting each other. So I wonder if
727 there's something that's so intuitive or obvious that we almost feel like we don't need to
728 say it, about what women offer each other. Does that make sense?

729 P40: Yeah, yeah...yeah. And I had a hurdle to get over in getting sober because I didn't
730 trust women. I mean, I didn't trust men either, but I didn't trust women. Yeah, they're,
731 cause I had this jealousy problem. This huge jealousy of feeling insecure and threatened
732 and not good enough because of being cheated on by, all kinds of people. And uh,
733 sometimes by women friends of mine. And so I just didn't trust women at all. Not like I
734 was trustworthy either! I wasn't. So, it took a while to get, open up to that. It really took
735 me a while to open up to anybody. But now, that's the most valuable part of my program
736 is my friendships with women.

737 R41: Which is something you really had to learn from scratch, is how valuable these
738 relationships are.

739 P41: Yeah, because sometimes I'll be talking to someone I sponsor and she'll be like, oh,
740 I always had women friends, I never had any problem with that. And I'll be like really,
741 huh? OK.

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742 R42: It's interesting, I've heard and read, a lot of people say that you know, it's one of
743 those things like, women who come into AA often don't trust other women. So, it's
744 interesting that your experience with sponsees has often been—

745 P42: Some of them, yeah. Some of them have ongoing, good relationships with women
746 friends.

747 R43: And, that makes sense. I mean, there's all kinds of people.

748 P43: Yeah. So, I first like, practiced with my sponsor. That was one of the things that was
749 like, really good for me, was being really honest with a woman about like...icky things.
750 And by icky things I mean like, jealousy and envy, which you might call the smaller
751 defects, but really those are the things I just really didn't want to talk about. Because, I
752 want you to see me this way, I didn't want you to seem petty, and small, and sneakily
753 saying something about her in a way that, you can't pin me down for saying it, but I
754 know how to do it because I'm that sneaky. You know?

755 R44: The manipulation.

756 P44: Yeah. And in fact at one point, she—oh, I know, I was somewhere like in my first
757 year or two. And my sponsor was single at the time. And I was very aware of that.
758 Because A, she didn't confide in me, she had friends, she didn't need this person to
759 support her. And also, my head was up my ass most of the time. I was not even aware
760 that she had a life outside of me. And uh, so then she was single and then she was kind of
761 looking around, and she was kind of boy-crazy, quite frankly. And I was aware of that,
762 but I sometimes would get irritated or hurt by it when she was supposed to be spending
763 time with me. And I didn't know if I had a right to say anything about that or not, cause I
764 just really thought she was wonderful. And um, so at one point I said something about it
765 to this woman, Carol, who had actually been the person who brought me to Fairhaven
766 when I was in treatment. I didn't know her, she took me to Fairhaven, and uh, she had
767 been sponsored by Lucia too, so I told her about this one meeting I had gone to at
768 Southside, I was supposed to meet Lucia there, and she was running around like flirting
769 with everybody. And I thought, I thought like, we were supposed to talk. So, I drove
770 home from there crying, saying, they say you'll love you until you can love yourself!
771 And nobody's lovin' on me! So I talked to Carol about that, and she said, well you're not

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772 wrong about that. And you know, maybe you want to look for a different sponsor. And I
773 thought, I don't want a different sponsor. I love what she tells me and gives me, it's so
774 clear, so true and it's so purely alcoholics anonymous. She doesn't make anything up or
775 anything else. She just gives that to me. And um, so I don't know why I was even brave
776 enough to do this, but I decided to talk to her about this. And I have to say, I had never
777 done that in a friendship even before in my entire life. Because I was an air force kid, we
778 moved every year, I had to drop them anyway. If somebody did something I didn't like, I
779 just didn't seem them. And I didn't feel the loss of it. But this was something that had
780 become valuable to me. And um, so I did. I talked to her about it. And I could see her
781 kind of go, oh my god, if Pam, as sick as she is, is noticing this, it must be really out
782 there, you know, I must be a little out of control. And she also said, well you're right
783 about that and I'm wrong for doing that, and I won't be doing that when you and I are
784 together anymore. It was like, it got solved. Like she listened, she heard, she
785 acknowledged it, she offered to fix it. That was the first time anything like that had
786 happened in my life. Luckily I did it with somebody like her, she didn't say like, Well!
787 R45: It sounds like it was a pivotal experience for you to realize that you could have a
788 relationship with a woman that was invested, you know that both sides were invested and
789 there could be honesty in you know, where previously there would have been
790 manipulation.

791 P45: Right. There could be honesty, and there could be like, acceptance, and there could
792 be willingness to work to make it better, you know?

793 R46: So the relationship can grow.

794 P46: Yeah.

795 R47: Which for you, sort of, hadn't been part of your life—these relationships that
796 evolve, and get richer.

797 P47: Right, right.

798 R48: So is that part of what happens at these women's retreats too?

799 P48: The only one I know about is the Fairhaven one. We started that years ago when
800 Fairhaven was a pretty small group. And Steve and I have a little cabin over on San Juan
801 Island and we started—and there was a very small number of women, like maybe seven

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802 or eight women in the group. So I started having them over for a weekend in the summer
803 to the cabin. And we would hang out, and one of the guys was like, what do you women
804 do over there? And I was like, well we're girls, so we mostly like, eat and talk. And then
805 we'd go for hikes and go to the beach or whatever, and it was just like this intimate group
806 of women. And I really felt like some deeper connection the first time we did it. And it
807 was funny cause most of us said, I don't really wanna do this, like, we felt kind of
808 nervous about being like, stuck there for a whole weekend, I couldn't leave because it
809 was on San Juan Island—what if I was uncomfortable? So, I think a much deeper bond
810 was formed because of the time. And then people could go off in groups of two or three,
811 and we'd always have meetings at the retreats where, probably like any women's
812 meeting, something of more depth is shared because you don't have the fear, as much
813 fear about—you feel safer with women I guess. So we did that for a few years—oh I
814 knew what it was. It was like a sponsorship line that we did, my sponsor, the people she
815 sponsored, the people they sponsored. So then some other people came to town and
816 joined our group, like Eileen and Veronica and Arlina, and Molina. So, they weren't part
817 of our sponsorship group, they had their own sponsors and their own way of doing things.
818 And we thought, we can't really do this anymore, it's exclusive. And we thought, we
819 need to open it up to all Fairhaven women. So, we did that. And that worked for a couple
820 times over on the island and then we just had too many people. So, we started looking
821 around and we've had it in various places in the county. And uh, I just think, the fact of
822 spending a couple of days, really, with people, is what's valuable. Like, I noticed this
823 year they changed it a little bit and they opened it up to people who weren't gonna spend
824 the night here but wanted to come—and they would pay a lesser fee and just show up in
825 the daytime. And then someone who is important to me only showed up for the meetings.
826 And I think part of it was that I missed her, but I also thought, it's kind of disruptive.
827 When you have this thing established where we're cooking together, figuring things out
828 together, we're going on hikes together, people are swimming or some people are just
829 sitting on blankets talking. You know where, you're free to do whatever you want and we
830 had like a campfire at night, you don't have to have like, real organized things. Or some

831 people got together and played a boardgame or whatever. And I thought just having
832 people come for the meetings was disruptive. Now maybe that's just me.

833 R49: That makes a lot of sense to me. I mean just that process of togetherness, it's a
834 process. And the people who are coming in aren't aware of that. Whether it's good or bad
835 or casual, they don't have the awareness.

836 P49: Right, right. I mean, it still worked for me, I mean I got to know some people, Becca
837 and Susan and Alyssia, people I didn't have as much background with. I mean some of
838 these women I've known for years and I have a lot of background with. But I like to get
839 to know people that I haven't connected with that deeply yet. I mean, I've known them,
840 but I haven't known them that deeply. So, I still got that out of it, I just noticed that one
841 thing. There's something about like, going away, that's kind of what retreat means. That
842 you're out of you're life and you go away and you're here, now let's see what happens
843 here. You know. You don't have distractions, then let's see what comes out of it.

844 R50: Do you sponsor people here and in Arizona?

845 P50: Um, I haven't had an opportunity to sponsor anyone in Arizona. I'll tell you, I'm
846 reluctant to take on any newcomers because I'm gone half the year. And sponsoring a
847 newcomer from afar, I don't know if that's fair to her. I mean, I'm always willing to do it,
848 I did try it once, it was somebody who had experience in AA but she relapsed, and was
849 like oh, please, please! But she did have knowledge and experience in AA, but it didn't
850 work. And I don't know if it would have worked with her anyway, she just went off and
851 was crazy for a while. So, I have one sponsee who's been sober for 20 plus years. And,
852 Mary and I sort of co-sponsor each other. That really wasn't my idea. But, I asked her to
853 sponsor me—she had been my service sponsor when I was doing a lot of district service.
854 But Lucia was gone, she had moved away and I was sponsoring a lot of people and I was
855 like, thinking like, I'm kind of not checking in with a sponsor really, I don't think that's
856 right that I'm not—I should have somebody to tell on, tell about myself to, and get honest
857 with myself. Because I don't want to be like, the guru here. So I called Mary up and I was
858 like, hey Mary, are you taking any new sponsees? And she said no, which is always her
859 first answer, and I said oh, rats, I was going to ask you to sponsor me. And she said oh
860 you? Oh yeah, I'll sponsor you! She thought I was going to foist some newcomer off on

861 her. And you know, her experience is that she had, you know, she was—it was almost 40
862 years ago and they didn't really have this sponsor thing like they have it today, so she
863 doesn't really have experience doing that, specifically, but she's getting it. She's got
864 somebody that's new now, and she's doing it. So then, after she was my sponsor then it
865 was like, a year or so, she was like, well, you know, I call you my sponsor too, we
866 sponsor each other and I was like, you didn't even ask me! I hadn't like—maybe you've
867 just given me sponsor direction like, we will sponsor each other which, it works out ok, it
868 works out ok, you know. We've both been sober long enough that we can do that.

869 R51: That you can provide each other with some accountability?

870 P51: Yeah, that's what it is. And very rarely do we really need, but you know, what if it
871 is—or if I notice that I'm being...the only thing I can really think of in the last few years
872 is I had this huge resentment against this guy down in Arizona, and uh, it was a huge
873 resentment because he had 30 years, and he'd tell you at every meeting. And he was
874 always telling the newcomers to go drink, like, if you had resentments, who cares about
875 resentments we don't need to worry about that, rigorous honesty, give me a break! I
876 haven't had a drink in 30 years and if you're having resentments you should go drink!
877 You know, and I was like—it pissed me off so bad! And everybody else in the group was
878 like, la la la la la, and I'd even try to get them to talk to me about it and they wouldn't do
879 it! Cause they were all about patience and tolerance I guess, and I was like, am I the most
880 intolerant person in the group? So I had to talk to her about that, and it lasted through two
881 years, you know. And you know what really helped me, not praying for him, not loving
882 him—Mary told me to love him—you know what helped me was this guy, John, after the
883 meeting one night he was like, that guy, I just wanna punch him!

884 R52: [laughter] You had some fellowship around this experience!

885 P52: Yeah! I was like, ok! I'm not the worst person in the room you know. And I'd call
886 Mary up and I'd be like, Mary, this guy is bothering me so much that I'm starting to plot
887 things that I can say when I share—and he'd call me out too, I'd say something like, I'd
888 just quote the big book or something, I'd say it requires us to be honest or something and
889 he'd say, honesty—he made a point of commenting on what I'd say. So I said, listen
890 Mary, I'm starting to plot things on what I'm gonna say, and I'm gonna call him out, only

891 not directly, and here's what I'm gonna say. We have accountability, but everyone in the
892 room is gonna know what I'm saying, so I'll say, you know, I'm so grateful to be relieved
893 of the enslavement to alcohol, and uh, beyond that I'm really grateful to AA for giving
894 me a design for living so that I don't have to be an asshole! Like I used to be, you know?
895 Because of these steps—because he never talked about the steps so you know, the steps
896 have really delivered me from being an asshole—Mike! [laughter]. So just telling her that
897 helped me not to do it, sometimes you just tell on yourself. I mean, you know better but,
898 you know. So its' stuff like that, or she has decisions to make about her daughter who is
899 just a hopeless, hopeless alcoholic. She'll have questions about that, about boundaries or
900 something. So it's that kind of thing, we're both like, we're not high maintenance. So, it
901 works for us. But I have started sponsoring a newer person and the only reason is because
902 she asked me, and she asked me because three other people in the program I think had
903 kind of tried working with her and they all told her to call me. I think because I'm a
904 nurse, and she's nurse, and she's lost it all. She's really struggling. Got a lot of wreckage.
905 A lot of wreckage. So I have been working with her, but she's really willing. So it's
906 working so far. She's afraid about me leaving, I just go, well, we'll cross that bridge
907 when we come to it, and maybe you'll find somebody here you can work with. Or we'll
908 try it by phone. We'll see, we'll see.

909 R53: Mm. Rich stuff! So, I promise that I will conclude these things in 90 minutes, and
910 we're a little bit over that, but I don't want to rush you. Because it's not for me, it's
911 because I want to be respectful of your time, so I guess I just want to give you a chance to
912 tell me anything else that you think is important.

913 P53: You don't have anymore questions?

914 R54: No, I just, you've given me great things to think about. Um, lots of experience.

915 P54: You know, what I was thinking about was the question, what is recovery? What
916 does recovery look like, is it different to different people, or something like that, and I
917 think about this and I often quote this line, it's my favorite part of the 12 and 12. It's in
918 step 12, it's near the end and it says, service gladly rendered, obligations squarely met.
919 And then later on in that paragraph it says, true ambition is not what we thought it was.
920 True ambition is the desire to live usefully and walk humbly under the grace of god. So I

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921 was thinking about that in the last few days just kind of thinking, what does that mean as
922 far as, cause my desire is—I had a desire to get sober, that was my ambition. And then in
923 the book it says my ambition is to live usefully, so to me I think that’s what recovery is,
924 is to live usefully. To live usefully means to me that my life has a purpose. And I think
925 that, I don’t think we get self-esteem from other people, I think we get self-esteem from
926 the things that we do, and uh, having a purpose to ones life. I mean, you’ll see these
927 studies now with like, scale of happiness, and that’s always on there, like, to have a
928 purpose and also to have a sense of spiritually. So like, to live usefully I think is like a
929 purpose, however that manifests in different people’s lives. And I think that has to do
930 with looking out into the world as opposed to looking in so much. And uh—

931 R55: The world actually grows.

932 P55: Oh yeah! It gets, my world was so small, and had been getting smaller in late stage
933 alcoholism. And um, yeah, so like, living usefully like living in the world and being of
934 use to people, like, having something to offer. You know, and uh, then walk humbly. You
935 know, that business about ego deflation. And Bill Wilson wrote on this a lot, you know,
936 that’s really the whole point of—that’s what anonymity means. It’s this ego deflation,
937 you know. Which makes life so much more comfortable, it means I didn’t have to fight
938 all the time! I was such a fighter because I thought nobody was going to take care of me,
939 I had to do it. And uh, out of the grace of god, which means to me that I have like , a
940 spiritual center. And again, that manifests itself many different ways for different people.
941 But for me it’s like what I asked for the day I got sober. Which was comfort. That’s all I
942 asked for.

943 R56: And you had the desperation at that moment to not, put conditions on it or to, uh,
944 psych yourself out by making guesses about what it would look like—it was just,
945 whatever is going to give me peace of mind—

946 P56: It was pretty pure! Yeah, yeah, I can’t be alone with it. And I’ve never forgotten that
947 deal, I think it was a deal. In fact, when I look back on it I think I probably took those
948 first three steps right then—I couldn’t have identified that I had done that but I admitted
949 my powerless, I admitted that I couldn’t do it by myself and that I, asked for help. I did
950 have to go and then work those steps. And sometimes I still have trouble with it like, I

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951 don't know what this third step is! Or, I'm having trouble believing in any kind of higher
952 power! So, you know, some of those things don't last. You have to continue to work on
953 it. And that's what recovery for me today is, it's going to meetings to be reminded, to be
954 reminded that I need to be here, that I, it's risky for me to leave given my own history,
955 I'm reminded of my history when I listen to other people talk. And then you know,
956 staying in touch with the people and having fellowship.

957 R57: Mm, that's beautiful. Service gladly rendered, obligations met squarely.

958 P57: Yeah, I think it says service gladly rendered, obligations squarely met, problems
959 solved, something...with god's help. You know, I mean I wouldn't have thought that was
960 attractive when I first got sober, service gladly rendered? Obligations! No! You know,
961 but it's kind of like, when I was archivist for the district, so I was really interested in
962 history—I'm interested in history anyway, but we had gone to Akron at one point, went
963 to the Akron archives and looked at Dr. Bob's big book and that kind of stuff, and my
964 sister, her father in law had passed away, and he had stopped drinking but he never
965 worked a program and he was sober but he was an asshole and when he died nobody like
966 him, and he didn't ever pick up a drink again. And she said well we're going through
967 Robby's things and he's got this big book here and I thought of you. And it turns out, it
968 was a first edition—not the first printing, not the big red one, but it was a first edition big
969 book and I'd always wanted one. And I was so excited I was like, vibrating—I gotta get
970 that big book, I gotta get that big book! And Steve's like, yeah Pam, that's great! You can
971 like, share that at a meeting, you tell the newcomers, all you gotta do is stay sober for
972 nine years, and you too can get an old book! [laughter]

973 R58: Life gets so simple!

974 [end interview]

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1 R1: Please tell me about your experience getting sober as a woman in AA.

2 P1: OK. Do you want like, back history?

3 R2: You can tell me anything that think will help me understand your experience.

4 P2: Oh, Ok Um, well, I got sober um, august 25th 2010. And I basically, I had a lot of
5 struggles growing up with like, identity issues and I started drinking in college. And I felt
6 like, it really helped me um, I felt like it helped me break out of my shell, like just not
7 care so much, and just um, I don't know, I just was never really good with emotions and
8 dealing with myself. So when I started drinking it was amazing for me because I just was
9 able to fit in, I guess. And so um, being really um, self-conscious is sort of a lot of my
10 story, and intertwines with men. And so, I did a lot of sleeping around when I was out
11 and, you know, sleeping with multiple people and just, you know I always felt like, this
12 sense of—nobody's going to love me and this was the only way I could find passion, or
13 just—you know, it was a lot of self-degradation that went into a lot of my drinking. And
14 so, how I got sober, I spent seven years with my ex who I'd met in college. And he was
15 very controlling and abusive and just, all around not a good person. And so it was sort of
16 the situation where my parents had met him and immediately were onto his games. And
17 so, I basically chose him over my family for almost a decade. And eventually it came to
18 the point where like, he ended up getting arrested, and I ended up having to bail him out
19 um, and it was just...it was just a bad situation. It was sort of like, the straw. And so I
20 ended up calling my parents and saying, I can't do this anymore, you know. And so they
21 ended up coming and getting me because they were selling their house in Arizona and so
22 they came and got me and I came out here. And I thought, like, my thing when I left my
23 ex was, oh, I need to get sober and work on myself, but you know I was sort of leading
24 into, maybe there was a possibility of us getting back together, but I knew there wasn't, I
25 was just saying that so he wouldn't kill me, you know? Um, but—

26 R3: You mean really kill you?

27 R4: Oh yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah, He was super like, violent and crazy. Um, he'd spent
28 most of his juvenile time in corrections because he tried to kill somebody. Yeah, he spent
29 like, six years in jail when he was 11—started at 11. Yeah, he was super like, unstable.
30 And so I ended up, um, coming out here and being like, oh yeah, I do kind of want to get

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31 sober. Because I was drinking so hard, just dealing with my own demons and dealing
32 with the relationship and, um, dealing with being away from my family, and just not
33 having any kind of support at all. And so when I came out here I was like, things are
34 gonna be different! So, I was gonna live with my brother in Portland and just,
35 immediately ruined that. Just, like, I started drinking like crazy, met some dude off the
36 internet...just, off and running! Doing my thing! And of course my brother immediately
37 was like, no, just no, that's not gonna fly. And of course I was pissed at him because he
38 wouldn't just let me do what I wanted to do. And in hindsight of course, now I'm like, he
39 loved me, didn't just want to let me throw my life away—get with another person that,
40 yet again, it's just not gonna be a good situation for me. So I came and lived with parents
41 out here in Bellingham after ruining it with my brother in Portland, and did the same
42 thing. Just, didn't show up one night. Just, was out doing stuff, and my parents were like,
43 nope, we can't do that. Sorry, we're too old for that shit. And so I ended up uh, coming
44 home like, really early in the morning just drunk off my ass and my parents just didn't
45 know what to do, so I guess they—I don't know if they went to a therapist or what, but
46 they ended up eventually getting to an alanon meeting. And then came home and like,
47 threw a bunch of AA stuff at me. It was like, either you read this and get sober or we kick
48 you out. We just can't do this anymore. And in the back of my mind I was like, well, I
49 guess I'll just move back in with my ex. Knowing that I really didn't want to do that
50 because it was just like, my life would be over, you know. So, I ended up going to
51 Fairhaven on Thursday and it was just super scary. I was still hungover, still had rosy
52 cheeks and alcohol on my breath and feeling a little woozy. So, I announced myself as
53 new, I don't think I even said I was an alcoholic, I just said my name's M-, I'm here. You
54 know. And after the meeting I just got surrounded by women—they were like vultures! I
55 was like, this is intense! And they invited me out after the meeting and I was just like, I
56 don't know, it's a little sketchy right now with my family, they would probably think I'm
57 like, out at the bars.

58 R5: And they probably would have.

59 P5: Yeah, so I was just like, I think I better just go home after this or whatever. Which I
60 did. So I was—I don't know, I think I felt a little...I mean, I felt hopeful but still a little

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61 confused and weirded out by the whole thing, you know. Like I remember when I sat—
62 when I first got to the meeting there were two girls, I think it was, R- and P-, and they
63 were like, getting out of their car and just like, laughing. And my thought was, oh, well
64 this is just—it's not even a real thing, like they're probably just here like court-mandated
65 and...

66 R6: So you saw their happiness as suspect? It didn't occur to you that they were just
67 happy?

68 P6: Yeah! I was just like--Cause I was so unhappy! I was just not feeling life at all. So
69 just to see them be happy and being sober, or whatever they were, I didn't know, I was
70 just like—I basically felt like they were taking it as a joke. Like, I was there and it was
71 serious business, it was life or death for me, and then these chicks over here are just like,
72 whoo! Going to an AA meeting....you know, and I was just like, that's not funny, that's
73 not anything to laugh about. So I was just super resentful, I was just in a bad place. I was
74 just really...I hadn't had happiness for so long that I just hated seeing it on other people,
75 you know? And, so yeah, when all these ladies surrounded me after the meeting I was
76 just like, this is weird. I don't know. Because men are such a big part of my story, getting
77 any kind of attention from women was like, foreign to me. I was the girl who always said,
78 Oh, I get along with dudes better than girls. I never really gave girls a chance though,
79 either. They'd ask me to hang out, and I'd pick the dude to hang out with instead. So it
80 wasn't just them, it was that I wasn't giving women a chance, you know. And I don't
81 know if it was because of the back history of being an adoptee and being abandoned by
82 my mom, or you know, there's—it could be a number of things. So, after that I ended up
83 kind of just hitting up a few more meetings. Um, and it was just, it was sort of a
84 whirlwind after that. It was just, AA, AA, AA. And it was good—oh, so I remember. I
85 ended up doing that Fairhaven thing, and then I had been told about a picnic that was
86 happening at Fairhaven Park, and I was just like, I don't get it, so....like, you guys are
87 just having a picnic for AA? Like, I don't understand. And they were like, yeah! We have
88 homegroups and we have picnics, and it's just a chance for us to all hang out and be
89 sober together. And I was kind of, it was the weekend, so I was like, it probably is a good
90 idea for me to do that. Because I was at that point where every second I wanted to drink.

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91 That's all I could think about. You know, I went into the corner store and I'd buy an
92 energy drink because I was just trying to find any kind of, you know, stimulation from
93 anything. And that's all I could think about was drinking this energy drink, you know, I
94 can't drink enough of them. And, I had a bottle in the back of my car, in my trunk, that I
95 had just bought the night I got busted by my parents. And I just had that like, rolling
96 around in the back of my car.

97 R7: And you knew it was there?

98 P7: Yeah. I knew it was there!

99 R8: So you couldn't throw it away, couldn't drink it—

100 P8: Couldn't throw it away! Couldn't even look at it! Just knew it was back there. So, I
101 went to this picnic and I got there early. And I'm just like, swinging on the swings by
102 myself and I thought, this is so lame... I don't even understand! And I had one of those
103 like—it's either the red pill or the blue pill, like which one am I gonna do here, you
104 know, like I could either just say, fuck it, and go drink for the day. Or, or actually give
105 this thing a try. But being sober for even just a few hours, or through the night, it was
106 killing me. Because as soon as I had gotten away from my ex I was drinking every night.
107 Basically I would wait until my parents went to bed and just start guzzling until I was
108 sick and throwing up in the middle of the night at 4 o'clock in the morning, and just do it
109 all over again. Just every night, so even to be sober for a night and a few hours in the
110 morning was so weird, I was just like, I can't understand! So people ended up eventually
111 coming and I started talking to the ladies. And one of them—I was like, well, how long
112 have you been sober? And she said five or six years, and I was like, wow! That's
113 amazing, I don't get it? How did you do it? Like, did you relapse, or—and she was like,
114 no, I just stopped drinking, you know. I'm doing this program and I have a bunch of
115 friends and we stay sober together, one day at a time. And basically I was like, well,
116 you're not the kind of alcoholic I am because—

117 R9: This doesn't compute! Something's not adding up!

118 P9: Yeah! Because, that's not how I roll! You know? I just, I just didn't understand, like,
119 that's so weird to me. So I ended up uh, basically just continuing to do a bunch of AA
120 stuff, because I did at least grasp that, any time I spent alone or not busy was time that I

121 could spent thinking about myself and how miserable I was and how I just wanted to
122 drink. You know? And so, I just would go to meeting and then just be like, ok what's
123 happening after the meetings, and just, hanging out with a bunch of AA people and
124 talking about sobriety and, doing these really uncomfortable things like going on road
125 trips with people I didn't really know. Like, we would go out to meetings in Everson and
126 Maple Falls, and you know, it was super weird to me. It was just the community aspect of
127 AA, just, it was awesome yet scary, almost. You know, there's a lot of trust issues, and
128 there's a lot of white people, and I'm like, riding in their cars to who-knows-where in the
129 middle of the woods. And you know, nothing weird ever happened—I was sort of
130 expecting the ball to drop, you know? And so uh, A- was actually one of the people I
131 ended up sort of shadowing. When people talk about my recovery they're like, yeah, you
132 would just follow A- everywhere! I was like, yeah, yeah basically. And that's sort of a
133 pattern of mine, you know, to follow around the protector, you know, somebody that
134 could like, protect me. A-'s not like super aggressive or anything like that, but he's a big
135 boy, people aren't gonna mess with him. So subconsciously I think I was like, oh, ok, this
136 is somebody safe that I can tag along with, and he'll protect me, you know?

137 R10: You trusted him sort of implicitly, from the beginning.

138 P10: Yeah, yeah. And there was just nothing, there was nothing weird like, I was trying
139 to get something out of him, he was trying to get something out of me. We both learned a
140 little bit more about ourselves, like we were both adoptees. And I remember one of the
141 first conversations that I had with him and M- was just, it was amazing you know, talking
142 about being adopted and some of the damage that had caused. And being just, obviously
143 so grateful that we're here! I mean, I'm from Armenia, Columbia, so if I hadn't been
144 adopted I probably wouldn't be alive, or I'd be in an even worse situation. Um, but you
145 know, dealing with that pain of not knowing, and you know, the sort of nature versus
146 nurture thing. My mom was—obviously had issues. And wondering...because I
147 remember feeling that, whenever I would drink I would feel really close to my birth mom
148 for some reason. It was really weird, like, I never really—I've never really had a
149 conversation with her, obviously I've met her, but I've never really met her as an adult or

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150 anything. But I remember just feeling like, I don't know, when I drank I felt like...this is
151 what's up, this is where I'm meant to be.

152 R11: Well, you said something about how your struggles were with identity, and it
153 sounds like in some sense alcohol gave you an identity. That, no matter how terrible it
154 was you really could, like, grab onto it—it was for real.

155 P11: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And it sort of molded, it helped mold me, I felt, into a person that
156 I wanted to be. Like, I felt like I couldn't be that person sober. I couldn't be emotional, I
157 couldn't say what was on my mind, I couldn't just not care...and it was just—like, when
158 I drank was the only time I could ever talk back to my ex, and even then it was like, super
159 dangerous. But, you know, it was just...and even then it was like, when I drank I felt like
160 I could get the balls up enough to leave. But sober it was just like, protector mode, you
161 know, like I've gotta be the breadwinner and the consoling one and just super meek and
162 you know. Not very strong I guess.

163 R12: So alcohol gave you a voice in some sense, it gave you courage, it gave you balls,
164 um...the voice sounds really important, I mean, that's part of all those things, that you
165 couldn't speak up.

166 P12: Yeah, yeah, and I remember too, it was interesting, my mom—you know, my mom
167 had a really hard time through this whole thing because her mom and her were best
168 friends and my mom and me, just were, never...were totally different people. I mean,
169 she's like, artist hippie-lady, and sort of like very butch in her ways, and just not very
170 girly. And I'm not the girliest person on the block, but I still like shopping, wearing
171 makeup, wearing high heels, getting cute, and she's like nope! Not feeling any of that. So
172 we just never were close like that. Um, and so, it was interesting because when I was
173 drinking and I was living here and I was out and we had some conversations on the phone
174 that were really heated because I just said some of the things that I would never say to
175 her. I never was the type, like, I never was rude to my parents growing up. We always
176 were raised to respect your parents, and I never was like, you're not my mom! You know,
177 I never said some of the things that kids like, say to their parents. My brother actually
178 was the crazy one who would—F you! And duh-duh-duh. I never swore at my parents,
179 never you know, talked back—

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180 R13: can I, just for clarification—tell me if it's not relevant—you're brother is not you're
181 um—does he know where he's from?

182 P13: No, he's their biological son, so he's my...

183 R14: OK, so he's the one who would pop off.

184 P14: Yeah, cause he's, cause my mom and him are both hard-headed and very much
185 alike, so they would just get at each other all the time. Um, yeah, she just had a really
186 hard time with this whole thing. But I remember her saying, yeah, it's really frustrating to
187 me that you can't be truthful unless you're drinking. She's like, you show no emotion
188 unless you're drunk. She was always like, you're so stoic! And I never really had any
189 idea what that meant. I always thought it was like, I was brave or you know, that type of
190 thing. But the more she used it I realized she was saying I was just so disconnected to my
191 emotions, I just was so...she just couldn't read me, it was just like, I was so used to
192 hiding my emotions from people and not letting people in. And um, so...yeah, I
193 remember her saying that to me and just being like, yeah, that's totally right, I can't, I
194 can't show my emotions when I'm not drunk. I don't know how to show them, I don't
195 know how to feel.

196 R15: Sounds like you didn't even—you're not even aware of them. You're just in a
197 frozen state.

198 P15: Yeah, yeah and then when I would drink it was just like, blah! And I remember, I
199 sort of remember the conversation with my mom and I was screaming—just screaming at
200 her. And saying, you don't even understand what I went through, do you want me to tell
201 you all the things that he did to me? And just trying to, just like hurt her basically, or
202 provoke some anger in her, which is not my nature, um sober. I wouldn't try to do that.
203 So, that was definitely interesting and it has been an interesting process for her as well
204 because she now sees that change in me, you know. And it's like, people that know me
205 sober um, it's awesome but they don't know the other me, they haven't met the other me.
206 They haven't seen the growth, I guess.

207 R16: You mean the emotional, erratic you?

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208 P16: Yeah, yeah. Because when I came in, um, you know I definitely have changed a lot
209 and they've seen that progression there. But they never saw like, the crazy erratic me, or,
210 I've never relapsed, so.

211 R17: So, um, this is fascinating to me, and I want to make sure—I'm gonna come back to
212 this. Because you're talking about something I think people have never considered—I
213 mean, people who don't drink alcoholically, have the idea that when you drink you do
214 things that are out of character. And I think a lot of alcoholics are aware on some level
215 that they drink, um, because they need to and on some level it works—you know, that
216 whole idea that it's not that alcohol doesn't work, it does work to help you access parts of
217 yourself that are otherwise inaccessible. So I'm wondering about this process, if you feel
218 like part of you is kind of, I don't know—surgically removed, or if there's integration—
219 like, how's it going? To try to access those emotions now?

220 P17: Yeah, um, yeah, I think that that's been like, the biggest part of my sobriety, like
221 learning, um, how to deal with emotions. Or even, how to provoke emotions. I mean,
222 that's why K- and I are so close because we're like, the same, we don't really like to—we
223 see like, crying and being too like, emo or whatever, as weakness. And it's like, I just
224 gotta—she said to me yesterday, I said, you seem like you're doing as well as can be
225 expected and she was like, yeah, I got my game face on. And I was like, yeah, I feel ya
226 on that one, because it's like, I do the same thing. I can't, unless I'm alone, then I can
227 really feel like I let out my emotions. But at the same time, when I do that I'm really sad
228 that I'm alone doing that. So it's sort of this psychological mindfuck. It's like, can't show
229 emotions when people are around because I'm too scared to show that I'm weak or let my
230 guard down. But then when I'm alone the emotions just fly out, I have nowhere to—
231 they're just out there, in the room. So I don't have any really, I still have that connection
232 to being lonely when I'm emotional. Dealing with my depression which is also like—
233 getting depressed, feeling like I'm all alone, like, I don't have anyone here to help me.
234 And it's just like—you do that to yourself! Why are you trippin'? Even like my husband,
235 he saw me cry once since we've been together and we've been together for like, three
236 years. And he saw me cry when my cat died. And that was it, and I didn't even cry that
237 long. It was like, he got put down, I cried, and I was back, you know, back in my little

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238 hole. So, it's just like, that process has been really hard for me, I think, the emotional—
239 the emotional thing. Because sometimes I feel like I want to be emotional at some things
240 and can't, because I'm so used to just closing it in, and I feel really, uh, I feel like I never
241 get that release. And alcohol did that for me. I would get really angry, or sad, or just
242 frustrated or whatever, and then my thing was, I'd grab a drink! You know, and I'd get
243 through it, I'd cry over it, I'd throw stuff or break things, or just do whatever, or get
244 crazy, you know. Just let it all out.

245 R18: You'd let people know how you felt about things.

246 P18: Yeah, so now it's, being sober is, it's still hard for me to find that outlet for it. And
247 sometimes—I mean, I definitely like, psychoanalyze myself all the time, because like, I
248 know when like, really serious stuff happens I'm so, I'm in the moment but my feelings
249 aren't. Like, my feelings always catch up like a week later, like a week later I'll be like,
250 aw, man, I feel really off! Like, I just don't feel good, I'll feel bad about myself, or I'll
251 feel super frustrated or agitated and it will be like, a normal day, and I'll be like, oh that's
252 because of what happened last week, you know?

253 R19: So it sounds like you go—this is a different version, now that you're sober—you
254 called it a protective mode, which I think is interesting. You're mom called it stoic, um,
255 the words that come to me—oh, and also I think there's a caretaking aspect to it, like,
256 you're going to make sure everybody else's needs are met when you're sober, not
257 attending to your own, um, but there's something frozen about that posture. It's like
258 reserve mode, you can only afford to address like, life or death threatening situations, and
259 feelings aren't part of that. So now you're noticing, maybe a week later, whereas you
260 never would have noticed before if you didn't drink, but you still have a hard time
261 processing in the moment.

262 R20: Yeah, and that's like—I've been doing this for four years and it's still a process for
263 me. And the program really helps me because, I see other people being vulnerable on a
264 daily basis in meetings, or having a group of girlfriends now where we actually do talk to
265 each other, and talk about, you know, women's issues and things like that. And so I see
266 other people doing it, but I'm still a little bit reserved about you know, putting my shit on
267 the street. Even though they're like, my girlfriends—like, I have one girlfriend that I tell

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268 her everything you know, like me and her just have said our deepest, darkest, worst
269 things. And that's like, it's so great, you know? But at the same time, like, she's able to
270 let out her emotions like, she's cried with me and freaked out with me, and she's even
271 said like, you never really, you know, like you talk about stuff but it's like, you never
272 really let out—you seem, like, I feel like people—I've heard people say a lot, like, I don't
273 even know why you're in the program because you've got your stuff together, like, you
274 seem so put together. And it's just like, that's awesome to hear on one hand, but it's sort
275 of like, when you see a skinny girl and like, she could never have weight issues. She
276 could never have like, a problem looking at herself. And it's really like, that's probably the
277 farthest from the truth, she probably has like—we all do! So it's sort of like, don't judge a
278 book by it's cover. And so sometimes it's like, I wish I could be a hot mess! But there's
279 the other part of me that's just like, nope, I can't do it. You know.

280 R21: Because there's a price to keeping the façade up.

281 P21: Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah I think, I don't know, I'm still trying to figure out ways to, I
282 guess let people in? Or even let myself in, I guess, I don't even know. It's sort of um,
283 taking away the alcohol um, really inhibited my ability to um, to just think whatever, you
284 know, or do whatever, I guess.

285 R22: To drop the walls, and the defensive posture.

286 P22: Yeah, yeah.

287 R23: So you're still looking for a new solution. Alcohol was your emotional solution.
288 In some way that feels counterintuitive, but it really was.

289 P23: Yeah, and I've gone to therapy, I went to a therapist and that was great. But I also
290 feel like I've been so—I'm able to like, break myself down so much, that again, they're
291 like, ok, what do you need from me?

292 R24: Again, you can't let them in.

293 P24: Yeah, so it's like, I end up feeling like I just talk the whole time, and then I'm like,
294 well, if I just did this then that would probably be better, and...I just end up not getting
295 any, you know, sort of like, I want them to be like, oh, this is why you do this, and just
296 break me down in a way I've never been broken down before. You know, like, oh I
297 probably do this because I have like, subconscious feelings about such and such.

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298 R25: You're use of the word breakdown is compelling to me, because you're talking
299 about them breaking it down, like telling you, well this is this and these are the
300 ingredients and this is the reason it's happening that way. But a breakdown can also mean
301 like, emotional breakdown, which is really like—you have this suspicion that that would
302 be more fruitful on some level? So you're kind of stuck.

303 P25: Yeah! Yeah, so, I don't know. I mean, I've definitely learned a lot in recovery about
304 um, about this emotional thing and dealing with life on life's terms and um, accepting the
305 things you can't change and all those little things that we learn and seeing it really in
306 play. And hearing my mom be like, I love my daughter. I mean, she's said I love you
307 before, and said that, but the way she says it now is like, I know it's not just crap. You
308 know, like I actually believe it. And I feel like, I had a lot of struggles too with the whole
309 love thing, which is also another emotion. So, you know, I just, like I just, it sort of just
310 clicked to me the other day listening to someone's story that, when I was out, you
311 know—I slept with a lot of married men, and was totally ok with it. I mean, I'd have
312 some times where I'd be like, oh this is—I'm a horrible person. But then I'd be like, well,
313 it takes two to tango. And I'm not the one who's you know. And I think that for me doing
314 that was sort of like, nobody really loves anybody. Because if this person can just sleep
315 with me, and they're supposed to like be with their wife and love their family, and they're
316 willing to put all of that on the line just to be with me, then like, nobody—yeah, nobodies
317 really in love with anybody.

318 R26: And nobody really respects each other.

319 P26: Yeah, yeah. It's just all, you know, it's all just a façade. Like these, I don't know—it
320 was sort of like, everybody lives a double life and nobody is really truthful to each other.
321 And I think it was also sort of, trying to find love within that. But also realizing that
322 that—that it wasn't that at the end of the day. You know it was like, oh, I can get
323 somebody that is in love with somebody else to love me. Like, and then realizing like,
324 that's not actually what's happening at all.

325 R27: Well, you were choosing impossible situations where you could never be proven
326 wrong about your theories that people don't love each other.

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327 P27: Yeah, it's just really interesting. And you know, I felt like my relationship with my
328 family has definitely just changed so much. Because I felt like growing up was just—it
329 was really hard for me to like, assimilate into my family. And I felt like they never really
330 understood how difficult that was going to be, or it was.

331 R28: Were you an infant when they adopted you?

332 P28: Yeah, I was 18 months. And um, they went and got me in Columbia. And my
333 brother is three years older than I am. And my mom is Jewish and my dad is like, white
334 guy, I guess, Irish, Scottish. And when they adopted me they were living in Portland. And
335 then we ended up moving to Arizona because my dad didn't get his tenure at the college
336 he was at. And so we ended up going to Arizona of all places. And it was horrible. It was
337 just like, brown girl living with a white family. In sort of, the better side of town, was not
338 very easy for me growing up. Like, I ended up—the elementary school that I ended up
339 going to, my parents took me out of that school because the teacher was being racist to
340 me, apparently—I don't remember any of it—but I ended up having to go across the
341 railroad tracks to the other side of town where all the brown kids went to school. And
342 then, that was all fine and dandy, except they were like, you're parents are white? What's
343 up with that? And I was like, I don't know...

344 R29: Did you know—did you always know you were adopted?

345 P29: Yeah. So they would just be like, well, what's it like being you know, living with
346 white people? You know, it wasn't like, well what's it like being adopted? It was like,
347 what's it like living with the enemy, almost?

348 R30: So you were sort of being given language about your lack of an identity, because
349 they're assuming things about you because you're brown, and they they can't—they
350 don't even have a picture about, you're in this family—so you were divided from the
351 very beginning.

352 P30: Yeah. And it was really hard. It was so hard to make friends, and I was so outcasted.
353 So, I went to junior high on that side of town. And then my parents got this bright idea
354 that, oh, we want you to be able to get into your freshman year and know people, not just
355 come in as a brand new person. So they switched me. Because we have 7th, 8th, and then
356 9th was high school. So they switched me back.

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357 R31: Mid-year?

358 P31: No, at the end of the year. So I did seventh grade over there and got switched back
359 8th grade. And that didn't help much. I still didn't make friends, and was still like, the
360 oddball, and you know, it was just very, um, like very introverted, actually. Spent a lot of
361 lunches by myself just walking the halls. And then high school came along and at that
362 point I was just tired of not being seen, tired of not um, feeling like I was noticed at all.
363 And like, over the summer I had sort of blossomed and, totally different person. And
364 that's when I figured out that, oh—when you wear makeup and do your hair and all that
365 stuff, like, you get attention. You know? So that was sort of the beginning of realizing
366 that you know, F the girls, they don't want to be my friend, obviously. And dudes don't
367 care! They don't care if my parents are white, they don't care, you know, they just accept
368 me for wanting to get in my pants, you know? So I was like, well, that's better than
369 nothing. At least I'll have somebody to walk the halls with. You know, not just myself.
370 So, there was a lot of, already like the seeds planted for like, not being myself. Being me,
371 the adopted Columbian girl in the white family. It's not very cool. It's not the person that
372 I want to be, so. And it was just like, so I think that with the sobriety thing because you
373 have to own your shit, basically. You can't just be like, oh, I'm just kickin' it, I'm not
374 really an alcoholic. You have to say, yeah, I'm an alcoholic. This is who I am, this is the
375 damage that I did. And I never did that, I never did that in life. I was just always trying to
376 be somebody else, or like, justifying my behaviors or um, just not really um, in touch
377 with reality at all. You know, cause reality hurt me. So, um, being in the program uh, has
378 helped so much with that, but at the same time it's still a process. I'm still like—just
379 using a recent example would be like, K-. So, I talked to her, probably 20 or 30 minutes
380 before her mom passed. And so like, I talked to her and then, I was doing an event with
381 my rescue group so I look down at my text and she was like, my mom just passed away.
382 And I was like, fuck...and I ended up talking to B-, cause I didn't see the text and she
383 called me and was like, K- just told me that her mom passed away and I was like oh my
384 god, oh my god, and, so I checked the text, see it, and I went over to the ladies and they
385 kind of knew the history of what was going on and I was like, yeah, my friend's mom just
386 died. And one of the ladies didn't know like, the whole story, so I told her and I was like,

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387 yeah, she needed to get out to her mom ASAP, didn't really have the funds, we like,
388 raced and got the funds and ended up sending her out there and it was like, two hours
389 after she got there her mom passed. And the lady that I'm telling that to is in tears. And
390 I'm like, how come I can't do that? I mean, obviously I was emotional and I felt pain for
391 K-, but it was just like...fuck...I can't even imagine it, but I couldn't dredge up tears, I
392 couldn't dredge up that feeling. And I was jealous of this chick who could just cry from a
393 story about somebody she doesn't even know, you know. And she was just like, oh my
394 god, that's so terrible, I just feel so bad for her. And you know, it was just like, it was sort
395 of like one of those things where I could sort of imagine K- thinking the same thing,
396 where, if I could just drink right now, it would just come out. I'd be able to reach down
397 wherever those things are and just pull them out. Yeah, I don't know. It's still a process
398 of figuring out—and I guess maybe it's something about myself that I have to figure out,
399 because not everybody is emotional. You know, there are some people that just cry over
400 everything—my mom, cries over everything, you know. And sometimes I'm like, I think
401 my mom takes all the emotions from me. Like, I see her and I'm like, oh I can't cry too, I
402 have to be the strong one. My dad doesn't cry, but my brother cries. Also another
403 situation where I, I just got married and I had this wishbone from—so, I got sober in
404 august and I had the wishbone from the turkey that um, we had the year that I got sober.
405 So it was like, a few months after I got sober or whatever. And I had saved it and I had
406 kept it, and I was just waiting for an opportunity to give it to him. So at the rehearsal
407 dinner I gave it to him in this little box—

408 R32: To your brother?

409 P32: To my brother. And so I gave it to him, and I had forgotten the card, like a dumbass.
410 And so he comes over after and he's like, so what's up with this wishbone, I don't get it?
411 And he was there with his girlfriend because she was there through the whole thing and I
412 had gotten her a little wishbone necklace. And I was like, oh yeah, sorry, I forgot the card
413 so I'll explain it to you. And I was like, yeah, I've kept that, I held onto it as a reminder
414 of how close I came to like, losing my family and losing you as a brother and just like,
415 totally burning all the trust and I thought there would never be a chance to rebuild it. And
416 yet here I am, about to get married, you know my whole family is here and they're so

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417 happy. And he was just like [gestures tears], just crying and I was like, yep, that's about
418 it. It was just, still nothing. So yeah, it's just, it's really interesting. And I don't know
419 how that all ties into like, the fact of being a woman and being in these previous
420 relationships or being with people who depended on me to hold my shit together even
421 though I was the alcoholic. Even my ex, he didn't have an alcohol problem. He had an
422 anger problem and a bunch of other problems, but I was the breadwinner, I was the one
423 who was like, follow your music career, you know, I just want to see you happy! I was
424 like, taking the mom role, you know. Yeah, like, I had to be that stable one, you know.
425 But then he also let me be a drunk. That was ok because I still went to work and still
426 brought home the checks, still gave him money for his weed or whatever, never
427 complained and, so. Yeah, it's just...it's really interesting to see, to watch other women
428 in the program because it does help me realize that I'm not the only one that deals with
429 those feelings and those thoughts of, everyone is looking at me, everyone's gotta rely on
430 what I'm doing. You know, there's women with families, that um, have to keep their shit
431 together and that's like, I don't even have kids. I have two dogs and a husband. That
432 would be a little bit scarier I think. This kind of ties in too, with where I'm at with my
433 recovery. I'm like, do I want to have kids or not, and my biggest fear is um, not being
434 able to stay sober through it. Not that I think my kids would drive me to drink or anything
435 like that? Just, failing them somehow, being emotionally unavailable. Like, that is one of
436 my hugest fears. Like not being able to provide for them or protect them. Which is, I
437 think, a fear of a lot of women, you know. Of just, you know the mom, I guess, is the one
438 that sort of holds the—she's the glue in a lot of families, you know. And um, knowing
439 that my own birth mom couldn't do that I think really messes with me emotionally. And
440 my adoptive mom, you know, she's always been there for me and, has been that um, rock
441 that I could lean on. Um, but I think it's just that internal thing of, um, knowing that my
442 birth mom was not that for me. Being like, oh, maybe I'm just like her. Like I drank like
443 her, when I did shit that she probably would do. Like not caring about myself, just
444 running the streets and just, that kind of behavior. And sometimes I worry that the life
445 that I'm living right now as a sober woman is not the one that comes to me naturally.
446 Like I feel like, naturally I would be good at just running the streets. Being, doing illegal

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447 activity and drinking and being gangster, just doing crazy shit and this life that I'm living
448 now, even though it's awesome and I love it and now I've really grown accustomed to
449 not having such a chaotic life—I mean, it's not boring, I'm always busy, I'm always
450 doing something, but I guess sort of realizing that the path is what you make it too. You
451 know it's not always like, things aren't always just set in stone. Because I felt that a lot
452 with the identity stuff growing up too, and I feel like this is not—like I'm not supposed to
453 be here. This is not the life that was meant for me.

454 R33: It sounds a little bit like a um, like an authenticity thing. Like you don't, I mean you
455 can't change what color you are or where you're from—I mean, so when something is
456 that concrete. Like, people can tell I'm not biologically related to my parents, you're
457 looking for something that's as certain, as undeniable, as irrefutable as, I'm Colombian.
458 Or...and something about what you're doing sometimes feels like...like being adopted—
459 I'm not sure what I'm trying to say. Like, if you throw a pinecone in the river it floats
460 like—there's only one way to go, it goes the way it goes. And for you, there have been a
461 lot of choices that you've had to make that felt somehow superficial—not superficial, um,
462 maybe. Maybe like, superimposed.

463 P33: Yeah.

464 R34: I wonder if other people feel that way but it's attached to different things. Do you
465 know what I mean? Like, you'll hear, we're alcoholics, we drink. Like the normal things
466 for me to do right now would be on a barstool somewhere.

467 P34: Yeah, it's interesting. Cause um, in the program is where I've met the most adoptees
468 I've ever met in my life. And of course I've read things, like studies and things that lead
469 to that sort of um, adoptees, with the whole, you know, theory that alcoholism is
470 somehow genetic and, the identify issues. So I know I'm not like the only one. But it's
471 definitely been helpful to meet other people that aren't adopted that are in the program
472 that are like, yeah, been there done that, or yeah, I struggled too growing up, or I feel a
473 certain way too, when I drink. You know, just escape my feelings—

474 R35: Or feeling like a fraud when you get your shit together.

475 P35: Mm-hmm, exactly. It's not really like, you know my friend that I was talking about
476 that we share everything was like, it was sort of that feeling like, why do I still think these

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477 things, you know? Like, why do I still have these internal battles with myself, and it's
478 just, it's not a crime to think stuff, you know, you're still going to have the same brain.
479 It's just how do you take that thinking and how do you interpret it and what are you
480 gonna do with it, like are you gonna go drink over it or are you gonna take it and analyze
481 it or, what can you do to change it—or do you need to change it.
482 R36: So it's like, getting some perspective on it.
483 P36: Yeah.
484 R37: And it sounds like, you've talked so much about your friendships. Those sound
485 authentic. These are real connections, you're not going through the motions of being
486 connected to these people, you really are connected to them.
487 P37: Yeah.
488 R38: So that's got to lend some strength or sense of reality to what you're doing and the
489 kind of life you're having.
490 P38: Yeah, it definitely does. All of my bridesmaids are in the program. And they were
491 all people that have helped me with the whole identity thing and trusting other people and
492 feeling like not everyone is gonna just let me down. And I think all of that emotional
493 unavailability also helps me with feeling like, people couldn't let me down or people
494 couldn't hurt me. So, um, definitely the friendships that I've had with women have been
495 so helpful with just all of that. Like, I went on a couple of retreats, women's retreats. And
496 there was a lot of fear in that. Like, they were part of my homegroup and people I'd been
497 with but I was like, a whole weekend? And I can't escape and I can't just have a break,
498 you know, I have to just immerse myself. Those have been so great because, just hearing
499 other people let loose their emotions and crying, and just loving on each other. And not
500 taking it to any weird place, you know. Like not um, it felt so real. Like, being able to
501 um, be like, wow these are really people that are not gonna be like, fluctuating in and out
502 of my life. They're not related to anything bad. It's like something that's, like one of the
503 biggest accomplishments of my life. They're not like a friend of my boyfriend's, or a
504 friend of my family. They're not just like, some person that I met randomly. These are
505 people that are on the same wavelength that I am.
506 R39: They're your friends, your circle.

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507 P39: Yeah, yeah.

508 R40: And that's—I mean, in your story there's this miraculous quality, and it's what I've
509 sort of been trying to get at. It's easy to say, well my women friends are so important to
510 me, but for you to even make female friends was a miracle.

511 P40: Yeah.

512 R41: And we sort of take it for granted that female relationships are profoundly
513 important, I think it's maybe so intuitively obvious, that we don't even talk about what
514 we offer each other. You know? And both of those things, like identity, and I don't know
515 what else might come up for you, but it sounds like they're teaching you how to express
516 emotions, about support, like...what was so powerful at that retreat? You know?

517 P41: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yeah it's definitely, having women friends has been a miracle for
518 me, and even like what I was talking about with my mom, I never had that bond. It was
519 just like, there was always still a wall up. And um, being able to not have any distractions
520 of like, men, it's like, ok this is all women, like I can't—I have to just immerse myself
521 with them and uh, pretend like I'm having a good time, and it's all like, I just thought a
522 lot of negative things going into it, like oh, this is going to be terrible. But then getting
523 there and doing things that I'm like well, ok, if this was a guy I'd be doing the same thing
524 but it's not the same like we're actually bonding, and it's not over sex and it's not over—
525 we're not trying to get something out of it. I guess that's sort of a little bit of it. Like,
526 when I'm with dudes it's always like, I'm trying to evoke that emotion, that passion, that
527 love, any emotion that I can get. And with women it was never like that, it was like, oh
528 yeah—I never felt like I had fun, you know, and then with the women in the program I
529 had fun with them! And I'm sober and I'm feeling that fun, you know. And I'm like, oh,
530 I'm having a really good time! Laughing our asses off about whatever, and, being able to
531 have like, that comradery. Like, that sense of um, I don't even know, that sense of
532 community I guess. But like a community of women. And I guess, it's been amazing
533 because now when I think about it, like going back to the having kids thing, or certain
534 feelings or emotions that I get I feel...I don't feel alone in those so much anymore. Like I
535 can actually like, find other women I can talk to and who won't be weirded out by me
536 talking to them about it, and find that strength from them, and learning about how they

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537 did it. You know. Cause before it was always just, I was envious of people. It was like, I
538 don't care how you do it, but it's just crap, because I'm not doing it. I just always was
539 yeah, I guess I had sort of a sense of jealousy or, insecurity, and maybe that goes back to
540 like, sleeping with married men. It was like, I see what you've got and I'm gonna break
541 it.

542 R42: Or take it. Or both.

543 P42: Yeah. Exactly.

544 R43: So, it was adversarial. So this whole idea of comradery between you and a woman
545 is a new experience.

546 P43: Yeah, and not wanting to like, take what they have or be jealous of what they have.
547 I'm like, I can have that too, I just have to talk to them or, you know, have them be a part
548 of my life and be a part of their lives. It doesn't have to be this like, jagged thing, you
549 know?

550 R44: It's a pretty profound switch from like, a famine mentality to an abundance
551 mentality. Like, there's enough for everybody, we could all have love.

552 P44: Yeah, exactly.

553 R45: Which is something that, you would have probably laughed at anybody who told
554 you that five years ago.

555 P45: Yeah, it's just, having these relationships with these women is just, it keeps opening
556 my eyes everyday. Like one of my girlfriends the other day, it was funny because when I
557 started hanging out with her, well, she started asking me for rides to meetings. But it was
558 always really awkward with her. And like, she's black, so I think immediately, I was
559 already a little standoffish, because I was used to being like, the token person of color.
560 And so, it was like, ok how is she gonna receive me, and how is this all gonna play out.
561 And so, it was just sort of weird in the beginning. And then I learned like a few years
562 after, she was like, yeah, I thought you were so—I thought you were so weird. She was
563 like, you were so quiet and I was used to being really loud. And I think in hindsight, it
564 was sort of, like I was trying to see what card she was gonna play first. I didn't want to
565 just put my deck out there and see how it played out. And she kind of took that as me
566 being like, not really into—emotionless. You know? She couldn't feel my personality,

567 she was like, yeah you were pretty bland [laughter]. And I was just like wow, I've never
568 been—people that know me wouldn't consider me as bland. I'm known as being pretty
569 outgoing and pretty outspoken, but yet, still reserved. But still, definitely not the quiet
570 person in the room. So she told me that I thought, that's hilarious, because she's the one
571 person, she's my one friend that I feel like has really helped me not pass judgments on
572 people. Like I always had this thing where I felt like I could really read people. And I was
573 just like, yeah, this chick really doesn't like me! And I don't know what it is, I was like, I
574 watch her behavior with all these other people and when it comes to me she doesn't have
575 time to talk to me, or can't even get two sentences out, or um, you know, and my other
576 girlfriends would always be like, well, it's because you're a threat. And I was like, I just
577 didn't get that. I think all my girlfriends are beautiful and I was like, you're cute and
578 she's not hating on you, I don't understand, it's not like I'm Beyonce or something. You
579 know, I'm barely five foot, I look like I'm twelve, I'm just making up all these things,
580 Like, I'm tired of hearing that excuse. That excuse is like null and void to me. Um, and so
581 she'd always be like well, did you call that person, did you get her number? And so, there
582 were like three different girls that I swore didn't like me, and always acted like, funny
583 style, and so I ended up taking her advice and being like, ok I guess I'll like talk to her,
584 get her number. And they'd end up being totally cool to me! Like I ran into this one girl
585 in the smoke shop the other day and she was just like, oh hey! And I was like I haven't
586 seen you around, and she said, oh yeah, I moved to Seattle but I'm back now, we should
587 hang out, and just like, without that guidance it still would have been like—just as much
588 as I think I can read people, people can read things off me too. So I can't assume that I'm
589 not putting off vibes even if I'm not trying to.

590 R46: Well it also sounds like too, you're seeing these women who are responding to you
591 in a way that you have responded to other women and on the one hand you believe it, but
592 now you know too much. So you know that it's kind of bullshit.

593 P46: Yeah, exactly.

594 R47: That kind of um, competitive or adversarial attitude toward other women. Cause
595 you said, I love what you said—don't tell me it's because I'm cute. I'm sick of that
596 excuse! But you still kind of fall for it but you also know it's complete garbage. So

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597 you've had the courage to move through, like to do enough experiments to know that it's
598 totally not true, that it's a lame excuse.

599 P47: Yeah, I'm like, I'm not trying to hear that anymore. You know, I try to be nice and I
600 try to do all this stuff. But, it's all perspective, like, I could have some scowl on my face
601 or—

602 R48: Bitchface?

603 P48: Totally! Because I remember R- was like, do you ever think that it's like, maybe
604 they saw you—because I have really bad migraines, and not from drinking, well, drinking
605 didn't help but, um, so yeah. It's just, um, hereditary or whatever. So anyway, my first
606 year of recovery was horrible that—I lost my job, it was bad, it was major. So Roger was
607 like, do you ever think it could be like, maybe it was like, you were having a migraine
608 day and you just looked like you didn't want to be talked to and they just, took that one—
609 you know, first impressions are everything. And I was like yeah, I guess you're right—I
610 could be just like, not feeling life at the moment and they took that and were like, well,
611 stay away from her you know, whatever. So um, yeah, it's just it's amazing to um, just
612 have those experiences with the ladies that are in my life now, that teach me stuff. Like I
613 never thought that I could be taught things by women. And you know, I do feel like the
614 women that are in my life now, I do have that sense of love for them like they're family.
615 Like they're my sisters, or mothers or—you know, my sponsor is just like, super
616 amazing. You know, I talk to her about probably more stuff than I talk to my mom about.
617 I try to follow the code of like, don't dump all this stuff on your loved ones all the time.
618 Like sometimes you need to walk it through with your sponsor and figure out the right
619 solutions. And sometimes your moms or dads or husbands or boyfriends aren't always
620 the person that needs to be unloaded upon all the time. And so that's also been another
621 amazing difference of like, I'm going through something and I don't know how to get
622 through it and it's frustrating, and the first person I think of calling is my sponsor, a
623 woman in the program an who's not gonna judge me for whatever it is, how silly it might
624 be or whatever. And like, sharing that experience with me. So...

625 R49: I have something I want to ask you about that, but can we take a quick break?

626 P49: Yeah.

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627 [Break]

628 R50: What you just said about your sponsor made me think—like on the retreats and
629 things, like there's this idea that you don't have to get anything from the relationship, but
630 I think it's more—I'm wondering if it's more like, there's something that you get that you
631 didn't even know about before. So like, when you're with a man, even if you're not going
632 to sleep with him you're still able to elicit something that you need, something that's like
633 a drug for you—admiration, or sexual tension, or whatever you want to call it. And that
634 precludes all kinds of things that can happen between people that we don't know about if
635 we grow up with that being kind of our source of self worth. And so you learned—for
636 you, sobriety has been a process of learning that—you're still getting something from
637 your sponsor, but you didn't know it was anything you needed before, or could use or
638 wanted.

639 P50: Right.

640 R51: And so you're giving something too. It sounds like you've become aware of that as
641 a place for growth, as a process. That women have something that I do want. But that it's
642 mutually satisfying and beneficial.

643 P51: Yeah, and I think it's to...sort of like that mutual, that friendship. Like, it's really
644 interesting. I sort of, so like with K- for example, she and I are very much alike as far as
645 like the whole emotional—it's hard for us to cry in front of people and let our feelings
646 show like, how was your day, oh it's ok. Like my thing was always, like, just, oh I'm
647 tired, like if I was actually going through something instead of talking about it I'd just be
648 like, oh, I'm tired. My mom would always be like, uh-huh, yeah, what does tired mean
649 exactly. So with K-, a lot of it, I see myself in her. And at the same time I love her as a
650 person, as a friend and a sister in sobriety. Like, she's taught me so much about like,
651 strength and courage and being able to feel like you still have that default of not being
652 able to show your emotions but yet being so caring and so loving. Like, she always calls
653 herself sappy, but she's just so in touch with how to make herself, make somebody feel
654 good. Or like, checking in and um, so it's sort of um, the parallel is interesting with
655 another person in the program. So like with K- I've—she's helped me a lot just as being a
656 friend and doing things with her. But with other stuff, like with life stuff I feel like I've

657 been really more of a prominent friend in her life. And not that I think that finances are
658 like, any sort of means of showing love or anything like that, but like, you know, she
659 needs money I'll give it to her. I'm not going to ask questions—I have the means and I
660 can help her out, you know. Um, I let her borrow my car and certain things like that like,
661 I do that because I love you and you're my best friend and I care about you, and you're
662 like family. And then there's this other person in the program that has sort of seen that
663 kindness and played upon it a little bit. You know, I sort of started doing that with that
664 person because I was like, wow, I really see your struggle, like, you're new, I want to
665 help you out, like giving you rides to Seattle and help you with your situation, like that
666 exchange isn't there. Like, I haven't found that bond. It's just like, instead of me being
667 like, oh I just need to back away or whatever, I sort of got angry about the situation like,
668 again, it was just another person who was just trying to use me for my weakness—or my
669 kindness as weakness. Um, and so, it has been interesting to see that, to actually
670 acknowledge like...I don't know, people that are there in my life as you know, friends, or
671 sisters, you know, and that difference and somebody that um, just wants to take
672 advantage of the situation. Because it can happen with boys and girls alike. And I never
673 knew that before because I never let girls in. And so, it was like, it sort of like, made me
674 feel that used feeling again. Even though they hadn't really, it was a different kind of
675 feeling I guess, but it was sort of the same.

676 R52: But you recognized it. And so in that, you're also recognizing how much you have
677 to offer, besides sex.

678 P52: Yeah, exactly. And that's also an interesting thing because I—in the beginning, first
679 like year or two, I had times where I was like, really doubting myself. Like, why do
680 people even like hanging out with me? And even with my husband like, now, or before
681 we even got married, and even some days now, I just like, feel like I'm replaceable. And
682 I feel that these relationships with women have helped me not feel that way so much.
683 You know what I mean? Because it's like, they don't, you know, they don't want
684 anything out of this relationship, they just want to learn with me and to be my friend and
685 to hang out with me because I'm me, it's not anything else. And so I think that was also
686 sort of parallel with this—the relationship with K- and the relationship with this other

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687 person. Is that I know that K- isn't hanging out with me because I help her out in certain
688 situations. I think she recognizes that I'm a good friend and that's what good friends do,
689 they don't turn their back on their friends, you know. And with this other person I'm like,
690 you're not recognizing me as a friend, you're recognizing me as a pot of gold, or
691 whatever—

692 R53: A source of something.

693 P53: A source of something that is not friendship. And that hurts, you know. It's sort of
694 evoking that emotion of like, instead of just being, instead of just going along with it and
695 being like, yeah, you can use me, cause I just want a friend, or whatever, now I can be
696 like, that hurts my feelings! You know, I'm not cool with that, it's not how I roll. So, so
697 yeah. It's really, these relationships with women have been so instrumental in, in even
698 my relationship with my husband today. I am the woman that I am today because of
699 women in recovery. You know, like, I wouldn't know how to be. I don't know about this
700 whole being a lady thing, cause I still burp in public and I do very unladylike things, but
701 you know, they taught me how to, how to receive love. On a genuine level. And that is
702 crazy. It's so crazy.

703 R54: It's a miracle? I mean, I don't have a better word for it—

704 P54: Yeah, yeah. And it's just like, being like this is what I have for you and I just want
705 to love all over you and you can either take it or leave it, but either way, it's here. And
706 like, ok...I don't know if I wanna, I don't know...you know, but then realizing, not even
707 on a conscious level that I'm doing it back. Like, I hate talking on the phone, it's like the
708 worst thing ever for me, but um being able to be available and like, listen to somebody
709 else when they're like, can I call you? And being like, I don't want to talk to anybody on
710 the phone you know, but then being like, I just need to put my shit aside and be there.
711 And even that small gesture can change somebodies day. And it's just, yeah, it is a
712 miracle. It's so amazing to be able to say now, I know what love feels like. I can't define
713 it really, but I know what it feels like. Because if you had asked me when I was drinking I
714 would have said, I'm not even sure that exists, I'm not even sure what that is exactly, like
715 I know what infatuation is, and I know what being like, passionate about something is but
716 I don't know about this love thing. And I think another thing with the women in the

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717 program is that there's been consistency. Like, I never had that before. Like even if I had
718 a friend, I don't know any of the people I grew up with anymore, I have no connection to
719 any of the people I grew up with. Even, like, I had best friends, and, I don't know where
720 they are now. I never had that consistency. And granted, it's only been four years, and I
721 honestly can see myself years and years down the line like, still knowing all these people
722 and them keeping me in their life and me keeping them in my life.

723 R55: They're part of your identity now, and helped you forge, like you said, I am the
724 woman I am today because of them.

725 P55: Yeah, and sometimes that's scary, like I think sometimes with my alcoholism I still
726 have those moments where it's too much, like I just want to run away and not have
727 anybody know me and not be like, present I guess. But it's recognizing women like K-
728 and other people that still show up in light of like, major shit going on in their life that
729 show me that, yeah, you can't just like, run away from it, even if you feel like running
730 away, you know? That showing up and being there, like—and that was one thing I told
731 her, she was like, I don't know, I want to come home so bad but I'm nervous about being
732 around people, I'm nervous about going to a meeting because I might cry in front of
733 everybody and that's gonna be really weird. And I was like, yeah, it could be awkward,
734 but you never know, you could be that savior for somebody this happens to years down
735 the line, or even somebody who's gone through this already. It sucks to think that you're
736 a martyr or something like that, but it's not even that, it's like, paving the way for others.
737 Which is what was done for me.

738 R56: The way you talk about love makes me think of the way some people talk about
739 higher power and their pursuit of that. Like, they spend their whole life going, fuck you
740 god, there's no god, I know there's no god, and they're trying to prove that god isn't
741 there, like, obviously there's no god if you let me live like this!

742 P56: Totally.

743 R57: You know, you were doing that with love. Like, and then you come around and like,
744 really, I was pursuing it my whole life. I wanted it to show itself. I mean, it strikes me
745 almost as a version of a higher power.

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746 P57: Yeah, yeah definitely. And being able to say that I have that in my life now, that it is
747 encompassing my life, it's what holds my life together, um, and that's why it's so hard
748 with the K- thing. Because my family has been instrumental in my recovery. And also my
749 mom, you know, like my mom and I are so close now. And we were never—like I
750 actually now—like when she used to tell me that growing up, oh me and my mom were
751 best friends, it was actually in light of the fact that we weren't. And like, that stung, you
752 know, I was like, I want to be best friends with you but we're different people. And now
753 it's like, regardless of our differences, we still have that really tight bond. Like I talk to
754 her almost every day. And we share in each others lives, like I'm not scared to tell her
755 stuff now, and when I had my bridal shower she spoke a little bit and like, was fighting
756 through the tears but it was just like, I love my daughter, I have the greatest daughter.
757 And hearing that was just like, I've arrived! I did it! Like I somehow broke through that
758 barrier. Cause I felt it wasn't just breaking down my wall but breaking down hers as well,
759 that she'd built because of my craziness. So, yeah. It's truly amazing. And everyday I
760 learn something new, from the women, you know.

761 R58: Well, I don't want to make you late, but I was going to ask you also, do you
762 sponsor?

763 P58: Mm-Hmm. Yeah.

764 R59: So you really have women that you are actively passing it on, then.

765 P59: Yeah, which has been so...awesome. It's actually interesting because, well one of
766 my sponsees is, she's more like, narcotics anonymous, but alcoholics anonymous works
767 better for her program which is interesting because I never really got into like, hard
768 drugs, but I can only imagine that I would have had like, addictive issues. I mean, was
769 into some of the harder stuff but it was never like, I was never meth addict status or
770 anything like that. So that's been really interesting to sort of talk about addiction just in
771 general, and not specifically alcohol stuff. But, that's, it's just really great, it's been
772 interesting thought this week—so, we got up to, she's basically going to be on her ninth
773 step and she got a job and she's like, I'm too busy for life outside of work! And I'm sort
774 of, so my sponsorship I think is different than a lot of people's, um, because um, I think it
775 was just sort of the way—like my fist sponsor was very hands-on yet hands-off. Like you

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776 have to initiate everything and our relationship is strictly like, how I'm helping you. It's
777 not like a vice versa thing. Which I had trouble with. I was like, you're not a therapist,
778 like, when I ask you about your day I'd like to actually know, you know, like, how am I
779 going to do a fifth step with this person if I don't know anything about them? You know,
780 it's not that I have to have dirt on you if you're going to have dirt on me, but it's the
781 mutual—

782 R60: The mutuality, yeah.

783 P60: Yeah, so that was interesting. Because I ended up basically firing her at nine
784 months. When which was like, the worst time to ever not have a sponsor. And it was sort
785 of—it was sort of a weird situation where I felt really hurt by the, by her actions I guess.
786 So she was really, I was told later on that she does this thing where she's sort of like,
787 super into the program, super into the program, then she'll just like, drop off, just
788 disappears for four months, then she'll come back. So I sort of had that period with her
789 where she was sort of not very available. And, I remember I was, I was at nine months,
790 my pink bubble had burst already, I was just like, going through it—I was really having a
791 hard time. And you know, I tried to rekindle the relationship, I was in Portland with my
792 brother, visiting. And it had sort of gotten to that point where when I was going through a
793 hard time, my first reaction was not to call her it was to call one of my other girlfriends.
794 And that's great, I mean I love talking to my other girlfriends, but I should want to also
795 talk to my sponsor. And I remember talking to her, and she was saying that she was
796 getting a tattoo of her pig that had died and I said oh that sounds cool, you should send
797 me a picture of the tat once it's done, and she was like, oh it's kind of a sensitive thing,
798 I'm not really comfortable with—maybe later, sort of thing. And I was like oh ok, I
799 understand, like, I get it. And so I went on with my day, and I'm on Facebook, and she
800 uploaded a picture of it! And I'm like, what the fff-! Like, this chick right here! So that
801 was sort of the end of, I ended up telling her—like, I didn't tell her that was why, but—

802 R61: That is was the pig tattoo that broke the camel's back? [laughter]

803 P61: Yeah! But I ended up getting—not being sponsored by her anymore. I was
804 sponsorless for like a month and half and then I ended up getting my current sponsor.
805 And my current sponsor is also—doesn't really sponsor the way I do, basically what I

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806 guess I'm getting at, is I try to be really hands-on. Like, I'm always constantly checking
807 on them. Because I feel, for me, there were so many times when I was in my spot of
808 feeling lonely, or doing my whole like, I'm crying alone thing and no one is here to
809 console me, and yet, I've hidden myself. Um, I do a lot of checking in on them. Like,
810 how are you doing, how did your dentist appointment go, what's going on with this—I
811 feel like, I am sort of trying to learn how to balance that out a little bit because they also
812 need to learn to have some accountability for their program a little bit. I've reminded the
813 one you know, hey, you need to reach out, you need to keep this alive because I want to
814 get you through your steps and then you can pass it on to someone else and like, it's so
815 easy to let it go by the wayside. Um, but for me I'm like, I've experienced so much from
816 the relationships that I've had with these women that I'm like, you've got to keep this
817 thing alive! Like, if you knew what it could be like or what it could offer you, you'd want
818 it too. Because I know what it gives me and I'm like, hey, come on, come on! I'm like
819 rooting for them, and um, but this week I was like, I'm not going to send a text, or I'm
820 just going to see how they react to it, or whatever. And my one lady had relapsed, and so
821 that was sort of—she's done it twice. And the first time I was really—kids gloves, you
822 know. Like, it's ok, this happens, we met in the park and we talked about it and she was
823 like, I'm never gonna do it again! It's so horrible! And I shared my experience and was
824 just like, hey, the next day keep hydrated, remember to pray, read a little bit of the big
825 book, do something nice for somebody else. Um, so I'm sort of trying to learn how to
826 balance that out because I don't want them to feel like I don't give a shit because I do.
827 And I think it's hard because like, I've heard some people say that their sponsors are like,
828 I'm not here to be your friend, I'm here to be your sponsor. And I'm like, ehh, I don't
829 know about that. Because we talk about sponsorship as um, one alcoholic helping another
830 you know, and there's not supposed to be a hierarchy. Like I'm not your boss, I'm not
831 your mom, I'm just a fellow alcoholic helping you out as a designated person to walk you
832 through the steps. Um, but I don't think that in any way negates us from being friends or
833 from being able to learn from one another. And that was sort of how I felt with my first
834 sponsor. It was like, there was not mutuality there. With my sponsees I feel like, I can
835 learn stuff from anybody, you know, anybody in the program. And I don't ever want to

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836 close that off or close that door because I'm supposed to be their sponsor. Because
837 regardless in friendships—like I feel like the reason my friendships with the women that I
838 have now are so strong is because we don't sugarcoat it for each other.
839 R62: It's mutual accountability, it doesn't just go one direction.
840 P62: Yeah, it's like, this is how it is and this is my experience, or whatever, so yeah, the
841 sponsor thing has been a little challenging in that regard because I think I have so much
842 of my own fears wrapped up in it, like oh, I don't want them to feel like they're not loved
843 you know, going back to that love thing.
844 R63: Right, yeah. And that's where the balance is important. So that you're responding—
845 you're having self-respect and you're responding to their needs without sort of, taking
846 care of yourself by taking care of their—your imagined sense of their need for love.
847 P63: Yeah, exactly. So, um...and my one sponsee, she has kids that are young. And it's
848 just, it's such a...sensitive area, because I don't want to be like, dude! Your fucking kids,
849 man!
850 R64: Yeah, but you can't not have that feeling, either.
851 P64: Yeah, I'm like, don't be like how my birth mom was, or how so many people that
852 are in the program now because their parents showed them, this is how you deal with shit
853 in life, you get drunk. So, yeah. It's crazy.
854 [Wrap up, end interview]

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1 R1: Please tell me about your experience getting sober as a woman in AA. You can share
2 anything that you think will help me understand your experience.

3 P1: My experience as a woman in AA—I got sober up in Kodiak Alaska, so as a woman
4 it was way different there than it is here. Because the male to female ratio is different—is
5 so much more vast.

6 R2: Meaning that there are more men—

7 P2: Way more men. Ten men to—at least ten men to every one woman. And then there's
8 the aspect of me coming in, I got sober when I was 19, so, it was me—little me, little
9 young me, with all these old, old men—fishermen. And a lot of natives and so forth. And
10 so today we have some—today alcoholics anonymous has become rather structured, and I
11 got sober—it was real redneck. Service work was, hey come on down and help me bait
12 these tubs. And while we're baiting tubs or building fishing nets or whatever, these guys
13 out here were talking, and they're talking about steps and they're talking about sober and
14 talking about—telling some old drinking stories, and talking about, hey yeah—B-, that's
15 how—that's first step stuff they're talking about when they're telling some of their old
16 drinking stories. You know, B-, that's first step stuff. And then they got to talking about
17 god, and how, man I just—how they got drinking so much that the desperation drinking
18 led them to AA led them to god, made them want to be sober. Um, the fact that I was a
19 woman, that a was a female, um, you know they didn't treat me any different. What they
20 could have done was really ostracize me or isolate me as a young person, but they didn't,
21 they said, oh no honey, you're no different than us, no-no honey you're age doesn't
22 matter, no-no honey, what's between your legs doesn't matter. It doesn't matter—your
23 race, your sex, your creed, your religion, native or non-native doesn't matter. Race, sex
24 doesn't matter. It's all about getting sober.

25 R3: Do you feel like that was a product of AA, the inclusiveness of AA, or was that
26 regional?

27 P3: No, that was the inclusiveness of—it's the inclusiveness of AA, it's the unconditional
28 love that we have—today they have changed it. Um, and I was lucky enough to get
29 sober—and I got sober in '86. And the course in miracles and the women who love to
30 much—you know I got sober in the middle of the, seeking out your inner child and all

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31 that stuff, and the guys would say um, you know—the people that I got sober with would
32 say, gee B-, you could always go read this book. We didn't have a lot of counseling on an
33 island in the North Pacific but what we had was the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous.
34 And there was always somebody ready to talk about the big book and work steps in
35 whatever capacity that was, you know? And they welcomed me. And obviously when I
36 came in I had all the, how do you say it—the inappropriate sexuality issues. So I tried
37 using the sexuality, my sexuality, and they were like, no-no honey, we don't do that. And
38 they taught me. And it took time, and some of them did take advantage of that. You
39 know, I will never knock the thirteenth stepping that went on, you'll never hear me knock
40 that because I firmly believe it was part of what kept me sober. Some of those men taking
41 advantage—all though they were taking advantage, although they were sleeping with me,
42 we were still talking about the big book. They were still modeling sober. We're doing
43 stuff sober, you know. That make sense?

44 R4: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so, that was even maybe a benefit for you, because there weren't
45 very many women

46 P4: Absolutely, absolutely. Well, it was all I knew. I mean, when I came in, the bottom
47 that I had was very sexuality oriented. I came out of the sex-industry. I'm not proud of it,
48 I'm not ashamed of it either by the grace of god and alcoholics anonymous. But when I
49 walked into alcoholics anonymous, if you would have told me that I had to drop
50 everything and that too, you would have killed me, that would have killed me. Because I
51 didn't know anything else. Other than how to be cute, and how to be young, and how to
52 use it and how to play, and this and that.

53 R5: So, did you work with a sponsor at the time?

54 P5: My first sponsor was appointed, she uh, her name was laurie and at the time I got
55 sober I had 7-8-9 months, somewhere in there. She ended up getting drunk. And she was
56 appointed, it would be a phone call here and there. Sponsorship wasn't like it is now.
57 She's the one that held me accountable, but we didn't ever do anything real tangible, so
58 after she got drunk I never—my next sponsor was Katie, and she had like, god, at that
59 time five years was a huge, huge oldtimer there, and Katie must have had like three or
60 four years so she was way old, and I used her a lot. And um, then what happened was we

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61 just drifted in and out, but like I said, nothing was tangible but it was encouraged that you
62 not just use your sponsor but you use your mentorship. Use your oldtimers. So I used my
63 oldtimers.

64 R6: So you were doing bookwork with a variety of people.

65 P6: Anybody that wanted to do bookwork with me. Today they have this thing called
66 spiritual consent, you know, in the AA world community, it's like, back then they didn't
67 ask you for spiritual consent to tell you the truth, they were up your hiney ten ways from
68 Sunday you know, they were all the way up. Because it was expected that they were
69 trying to help me save my life. We don't care what you think about us, we don't care if
70 you like us and you're uncomfortable or not. We're gonna get in your—can I cuss?

71 R7: mm-hmm.

72 P7: We're gonna get in your shit, we're gonna get in your ass and we're gonna get to the
73 root cause, because causes and conditions is what drives us to drink. We don't care, we
74 love you enough to tell you the flipping truth. And they didn't pull punches. And god
75 bless them for that. Um, today you have to be nice to people. Today people have
76 boundaries, and I have boundaries and you can't talk to me like that! And they were like,
77 this is life and death. That's the way that I got sober. We don't care—male, female,
78 black, white, age, we don't care. Let's save your life. And um, so anyhow I had a lot of
79 my mentorship too so when I was without sponsorship I always had someone who was
80 working with me. Um, and then when it was time to—you know, I never hired or fired a
81 sponsor—and um, I was in a meeting and I was intangibly sponsored, Katie was in my
82 life but it was kind of, here and there you know, and I had complete respect for her. There
83 was nothing inappropriate, she wasn't doing anything inappropriate or wrong, and god
84 put this woman in front of me—Loraine. And she was from the lower 48, she had a
85 broader experience with AA and she had huge life stuff going on and that's what I had
86 gone through my first year of sobriety. Her brother was dying of AIDS and we had—
87 there was never any AIDS on the island yet, it didn't exist for us yet. And um, and she
88 was the first person I ever met who ever went through that and it was a huge, huge thing
89 back then, a huge scary thing. And I had just buried my dad, my mom had had a massive

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- 90 aneurism, I'd given my child up for adoption, I had just gone through a bunch of huge
91 life stuff—
- 92 R8: In that first year.
- 93 P8: Yeah, my dad died, my mom had a stroke—or a massive aneurism seven days before
94 my dad died, and I was six months pregnant. So, I had all this huge, huge stuff going on
95 and here was another woman who walked through big huge stuff and was doing it staying
96 sober, talking about it and still had peace and love and integrity and—wow. She was just
97 an amazing woman. And she talked about things like, having to drink the men under the
98 table. And that's how I had to drink. Basically, she read my mail, she told my story. And
99 uh, you know god puts in front of you—god puts the people I sponsor in front of me. I
100 don't go seek any of it. I was never taught—you know, when you're looking for
101 something, pray about it. Gee B-, maybe you oughtta pray about it! And I prayed about it
102 you know, and this woman was amazing. She's the one that first sat down and walked me
103 through step work, on paper. Fourth step. Four columns, out of the book, as it's
104 recommended, tangible, all the way into my amends and into ten, eleven and twelve.
105 Now mind you, I did little spot check inventories along the way. You know, gee B-,
106 maybe you should inventory that, you know. You ok?
- 107 R9: Yeah, the water—I'm going to have a cough drop.
- 108 P9: Do you want an allegra or something?
- 109 R10: No, it's not that bad, it's just my throat gets a little bit itchy. I won't get
110 anaphylactic or anything.
- 111 P10: It'd be fun to watch.
- 112 R11: You'd do the right thing!
- 113 P11: Only if it gets bad enough. I'll let you hit bottom first (laughter). Um, but anyway,
114 so that's my sponsorship. Loraine was my sponsor all that time up in Alaska. When I
115 moved back down to the lower 48 um, in '90, I came down here, kept Loraine and then I
116 moved down to Oregon, they moved to Montana where they were originally from—
117 eventually. So now, I'm in Oregon, they're in Montana, she's still my sponsor. So then it
118 was becoming apparent—I'm going to school and stuff down there—
- 119 R12: Is that why you went to Oregon? To go to school?

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120 P12: Yeah, essentially. That and a him. I married him. Well, when the oil spill happened I
121 got hurt. I blew my knee out, so I couldn't fish anymore. I blew my knee out so I couldn't
122 take the roll of the boat. So I went to school, I had to go somewhere. And there was just
123 nothing left for me on the island. It would have been toxic for me to stay. I wasn't that
124 coherent—that cognizant of my mental health, but everybody said B- you need to go to
125 college, you're dumb as a brick, you need to go to school.

126 R13: And this was the people in, the people you were accountable to and you trusted.

127 P13: The only people I had were the people in AA. I walked away from everybody that I
128 was drinking and using with up there.

129 R14: So you were up there using and drinking and then—so you got sober there, you
130 didn't like, go to Alaska to get sober, you were there and you sobered up.

131 P14: Yeah, I was there, yea I was there drinking and using and I got sober there. And
132 after I got sober all my dealing buddies thought I became a narc.

133 R15: That probably served you well?

134 P15: Actually, I ended up with a knife at my throat. I was sitting in the passenger seat of
135 a cab one day, right after I got out of treatment and they thought I was telling stuff to the
136 cops. And I had a guy um, reach in around me, and he had a picture of me getting high,
137 and he said if you ever talk...

138 R16: Jesus....(pause). So you went to Oregon for school, you didn't have community
139 there.

140 P16: No, not until I got down there. I got down there and plugged right into AA because
141 that's what I was taught. That's what you do when you go to a new community, to a new
142 town, plug right in. I had let's see...well I knew my now ex-husband down there. He was
143 a normie, he just didn't drink. He was down there, and so I knew like one person in my
144 husband's band that was sober. That's how I met my husband. But I went down there and
145 looked up AA in the yellow pages that's how we used to have to do it. And used a
146 telephone, had to go to a payphone—we still had rotaries back then. And called AA and
147 they said, oh yeah, there's—it would be the equivalent of an Alano club, but it's not an
148 Alano club, it has a board of directors, it's just a sober club. There's two of them in
149 Salem. And I went down to the SOS club and I pulled in and there were all these people

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150 there and I was like, oh wow. I mean, I'd never seen this stuff, I'd never been to a
151 conference, I mean, we had potlucks, we had an annual halibut haul in May, and then we
152 did a potluck at Christmas and we did a dance in the middle of the year. We always had
153 dances. But I' had never seen clean and sober clubs and Alano clubs and all of this stuff.
154 Coffee cups that have the serenity prayer on them, you know. I bought that sucker! Right
155 now! I had to have it, you know. Bumper stickers on your car, with a circle/triangle. That
156 was amazing! It was astounding! And all these people. And that's how I got plugged in
157 was just going to meetings there. I kept Loraine as my sponsor for a number of years, for
158 a long time. And met a woman who was very big book oriented and a strong woman, and
159 asked her to be my sponsor and we did big book, very tangible. And she was, gosh, for
160 seven-eight years. And then uh, she went through—I think she was menopausal, but she
161 went through and fired literally everybody she sponsored, everybody. All of them. She
162 had a new boyfriend too. But anyway, um, and so after that it's like, wow, so I got an
163 interim sponsor, cause actually I was in the middle of working the steps and um, I got a
164 guy to sponsor me, interim, what was his name? Wayne. And I did fourth and fifth step
165 with him, and actually it was one of the best fifth steps I ever did. And then uh, god put
166 P- in front of me. And P- was my sponsor until up here, oh goodness, 2004? When did I
167 come up here...2005. Cause I was going through the death of my husband, walking
168 through all that. And then when I met Polly was up here. And I thought, oh, there she is!
169 R17: So your husband died down there. And this was your first or second marriage?
170 P17: Second marriage.
171 R18: So you went through a divorce pretty early in sobriety.
172 P18: I got married six years sober, divorced eight years sober, then I got married again
173 seventeen years sober.
174 R19: Wow. OK.
175 P19: Yeah. And then he died, well, he killed himself 95 days after we got married. (long
176 pause)
177 R20: And then did you move up here pretty quickly? Was it partly because of that?

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178 P20: Yeah, I always hated Oregon. I never liked Oregon. I'm rather conservative, and
179 they're rather not. And I kind of thought Washington was a little more conservative than
180 it is.

181 R21: Oops!

182 P21: Holy god! I saw sandals and socks the other day, I about pooped myself. Not
183 really...

184 R22: You've got to go east of the mountains!

185 P22: I know, I've got to find some nice redneck man. Anyway...um, I have no idea what
186 we're talking about now.

187 R23: Well, one thing I have a questions about, you talked about—you've worked the
188 steps and you've done it a lot of ways, but book work can be working the steps and book
189 work can be something really different. So you've had this communal, getting into the
190 book in Alaska. And then it sounds like you went all the way through the steps with—
191 Loraine, before you left Alaska.

192 P23: Right, I went all the way through the steps, but probably with fifteen different
193 people. It wasn't...this is me, this is you, I am your sponsor, I am the only one you can
194 go through the book with and work the steps with. That's not how it really is—was, is for
195 me still. That wasn't my experience. I learned step one—and we did book studies and
196 step studies. There was one book study and one step study a week, and by god, you were
197 at it. But it's like, when I'm looking at step one, it was explained to me—I learned step
198 one, I had step one done before I ever came into the rooms of alcoholics anonymous. I
199 knew I was powerless and unmanageable otherwise I never would have walked in.

200 Otherwise I wouldn't be here. I—god drove me into the rooms of AA. When I came here
201 I looked around and thought, wow, these people seem to have their shit together, these
202 people seem to have a solution. Um, they said you better find something more powerful
203 than yourself because you can't keep you sober. Maybe it was because I made the group
204 my higher power and while I worked through my resentment—I was raised catholic, and
205 while I worked through that also found a god of my understanding. I was 19, I had the
206 mentality of a seven year old for christ's sakes. They said well, picture something that's
207 more powerful than yourself, but you better not make it the door knob because that will

208 fail. It was explained to me, we used Styrofoam cups back then in AA, and we smoked—
209 a lot! And this guy, one of the guys explained it to me, he said you better not make one of
210 these Styrofoam cups your higher power and he turned it over on the table and he went,
211 wham! And he popped that thing—for whatever reason it popped really loud and it made
212 a really huge impression upon me that I better not make it something that's fallible. They
213 said, you've got to find something that's more powerful than yourself. And the only thing
214 that I viewed as power was a big guy that sat on a Harley. So if I needed to picture a
215 higher power that I was it. And I must have been ten or twelve years sober and I was in a
216 meeting in Oregon and I told that story, I said you know—my higher power used to be a
217 big guy that sat on a Harley. And I don't think it's changed all that much, maybe now he
218 just wears white leather instead, or rides a white Harley. And my friend H- yells out, B's
219 higher power is Elvis! So now my higher power is Elvis. You know, it takes what it
220 takes...if it works, I suppose. But yeah, that's—we did it with everybody. It's like,
221 nobody—sponsorship was not ownership. Sponsorship was my go-to girl. When your ass
222 is falling off, you call your sponsor.

223 R24: Yeah, you said before that with L-, and even with K-, it's not exactly a pact but you
224 agree to be accountable to each other.

225 P24: Yeah. What it is, is this is the person that at three o'clock in the morning when my
226 ass is falling off, I'll call her first. If she's not answering, I can call any number of other
227 people. She's my first call though. My ass is falling off, any time day or night, she
228 agreed, yeah, call me, I'll be there. I'll have a certain level of accountability to you. I'll
229 have a certain level of um, of honor and integrity, responsibility to my relationship with
230 you. Now mind you, here's how god works in my life, um, I needed a lot of parenting
231 when I came in because I never really had a lot of parenting, I was the youngest of 8 kids,
232 my parents were done. By the time I came around they were done. And so they did that
233 with me. They taught me the hygiene things, and they literally dragged me to get my
234 GED, literally dragged me, sit down in this chair, take this test, no you're not getting up
235 to go to the bathroom, you're going to take the test. OK, you passed the test! You have
236 your GED, you can go now. That's how I got my GED—it was by no choice of my own.
237 I didn't have a choice, I didn't have a choice to get my drivers license. They said, ok,

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238 now where are we? We're at the DMV. You're going to go take your drivers test now. I
239 am? Cause I was driving without a license. And they explained this thing to me called
240 honesty and integrity to me. And they said, no, we don't drive without our drivers license
241 because that's not honest and you won't stay sober doing that. And they taught me about
242 feminine hygiene, and they taught me how to grocery shop, and you know.

243 R25: So, really, really practical stuff. No like—

244 P25: The inner child stuff?

245 R26: Well, like, if you think about...it also sounds like you're saying AA changed.

246 P26: Oh, it has. Absolutely.

247 R27: So for you it was like...the rubber is hitting the road right now, all the time, we're
248 focusing on practical stuff. In some ways it sounds less structured?

249 P27: Oh, it was. Absolutely. What's more important is what you and I are doing sitting at
250 the kitchen table...one of the things I always say is, the message that we receive in the
251 fellowship of alcoholics anonymous today is not necessarily, quite often not necessarily
252 the message that is transmitted in the big book of alcoholics anonymous. The message
253 that we receive in the fellowship today is not the message transmitted in the big book of
254 alcoholics anonymous. And alcoholics anonymous is a book, it's not a meeting.

255 Alcoholics anonymous is a book. Those people are just people who have experience with
256 this book, who do the shit that's exemplified in this book. And that's what we're
257 supposed to be talking about. Nowadays what we are supposed to be talking about is
258 what it used to be like, what happened, and what it's like now. But what it has changed to
259 is, we'd like you to share your experience strength and hope, even if you don't have any
260 experience. Go ahead and share it anyway! We only want you to share for three minutes
261 so everybody has a chance to talk. But trust me, you know on the day I walked in there,
262 the day my father died on August 23rd of 1987, and I walked into that meeting and they
263 asked you know, has anybody got a topic. And I piped up and I said yeah, gratitude. And
264 we talked about gratitude because I had been given the opportunity to make face to face
265 amends to my father before he died, in the previous may. And they let me talk, they
266 didn't stop me, because they knew I needed to be able to have that stuff. And now what
267 we have is, pay your buck, dollar an hour therapy. Which is different than an alcoholics

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268 anonymous share, which is, here's what I'm doing. Here's the shit that I drink over. I
269 don't know if that makes any sense.

270 R28: It does. Um, I've been given a lot to think about by the women that I've been
271 talking to. And I wasn't aware of how much it's really changed.

272 P28: Oh goodness yes. It's been whitewashed, it has been treatment-ized—I think
273 treatment and the courts have screwed it up, they have screwed up the beautiful purity
274 and unconditional love that is alcoholics anonymous, and we've created cliques,
275 exclusivity and—ok now, I need to stop with my opinions because it will just piss me off.
276 Because, we used to have a 75% recovery rate! 75% success rate, and now we don't,
277 we're lucky if we have a 1%.

278 R29: Right, and so when you say that—you said exclusiveness and cliquiness, we've
279 talked a little bit about that. Do you see different kinds of meetings as part of that? Like,
280 do you go to women's meetings or do you avoid them because you think it's like—

281 P29: Oh, there's absolutely a time and a place for women's meetings. Um, I think that—
282 the way that I was taught and the way that I do things, absolutely there is a time and a
283 place for women's meeting. Um, but as my sole meetings, if I'm only going to women's
284 meetings then I'm missing the male perspective. I'm missing perceptions that—men are
285 not bad. Men are just men! And I need everybody.

286 R30: So there is an emphasis there on being an alcoholic, and not a kind of alcoholic?

287 P30: What do you mean?

288 R31: I guess I just am interested in that, some people are opposed to women's meetings,
289 to gay and lesbian meetings because they say, we're alcoholics! That's the point! We're
290 here because we're alcoholics and if you're worried about what kind of alcoholic you are
291 then you're missing the point.

292 P31: Um, I was encouraged to attend women's meetings. We had one, we had one in the
293 town. I was encouraged, when I got sober, to attend the women's meeting because I had
294 sexuality issues. I didn't want to reach out to women, and it gave me an opportunity to
295 reach past that—oh my god—homophobic, it was a level of homophobia as well. You
296 know um, and I went, wow, these ladies are nice, and they walked me through this
297 pregnancy that I had, and childbirth, and I got to realize that wow, women aren't bad.

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298 Women were out for three things, your money, your dope or your old man. And um,
299 wow, these are ok. And so are the co-ed meetings. We didn't walk in and talk about who
300 we were fucking that week, in a woman's meeting. Nowadays, quite often it's, you walk
301 in and she's talking about him. And it's like, wait a minute? I mean, does that make
302 sense? And it's like, that's not what women's meetings are about. Women's meetings are
303 so we can have a commonality. And I believe there's nothing wrong with—like,
304 women's meetings are fabulous, especially with where I'm at right now, coming out of a
305 relationship. Coming new to sobriety when you need to meet some women, it's great,
306 absolutely there's a time and a place for it. But as my sole meeting, absolutely wrong.
307 Um, but—and at the same time, I have kind of an oddball opinion about the gay and
308 lesbian, I don't know because I don't go to those. Um, but it's kind of like...we don't
309 have straight meetings, why would we have gay and lesbian meetings? But you know,
310 I've never played in that pool so I don't know what the water tastes like, so. You know,
311 it's kind of like what's the point?

312 R32: Well, and so I wonder, what's the point of a woman's meeting? I mean like you said
313 there's a time and place for it, there's commonality—

314 P32: The inappropriate sexuality that I exhibited, I needed to be around women. I needed
315 to learn that women are not a problem, women are not the enemy, women are not fucking
316 all bitches. I hated women, I didn't want to be around women because I couldn't
317 manipulate them. Because I couldn't con them. Because they would call me on my
318 inappropriate sexuality issues, in addition to a lot of the men, but they would tell me
319 about that. Does that make sense? And that's sometimes, that's what we need.

320 R33: How important do you think that was for your sobriety?

321 P33: Oh, it was incredibly important.

322 R34: Ok, so it would have been a huge obstacle if you couldn't connect with women?

323 P34: Um, yes. There weren't that many women there, I mean there were three of us, or
324 four of us—on a big night we'd have five women there. But what it taught me was, the
325 things that it taught me besides that we're women and we all have va-jay-jays, is that
326 women are a safe place where I could go and they weren't going to take sexual advantage
327 of me. Although there were women there that were attempting to take sexual advantage

328 of me, which is kind of another reason that I have this weird kind of backwards view of
329 the homosexual meetings or whatever the hell you call them now days, does that make
330 sense? You know, this isn't about sex.

331 R35: Ok, so AA's not about sex, this isn't—so again, there's something about
332 inclusiveness that you have to get to be just an alcoholic among alcoholics.

333 P35: Right. It also allowed me to work safely through those fears that I had of women.
334 Anyway, I don't know that I'm making any sense. It was very strongly beat into me, this
335 isn't about being a woman. This is about me being a real alcoholic, just an alcoholic and
336 an addict if you will. Because where I got sober there was no NA. And...is, ain't.
337 Anything else is just—the twelve steps work for all of us.

338 R36: Yeah. So, how do you, given how much it has changed, I mean AA has changed,
339 your experience of AA has changed, it sounds like there are some regional differences
340 too. How do you—what does your recovery look like today, what does your maintenance
341 look like? How do you work with other people?

342 P36: Today what it looks like is um, and I get a lot of sideways glances from a lot of
343 people because I'll work with anybody. I'm kind of an AA whore, I'll do coffee and AA
344 with anybody, anywhere for any reason, you know. I'm not above taking a young
345 newcomer guy to Starbucks, in fact I did it just last week, goldarnit! Now if I have a
346 sexual attraction to him, that's different, I won't do that by any means. What does it look
347 like today? I have no—I don't have those issues with women, so when a woman comes to
348 me and says hey, I need a sponsor or some mentorship, I'm OK to do that today. I don't
349 do the exclusivity that some people around this area seem to do with sponsorship. I don't
350 call them sponsees, I find that very degrading. I know that when I came in here and they
351 called me a young lady and a woman for the very first time in Alcoholics Anonymous,
352 here we are, you know um, I know that our self esteem comes from within and our love
353 comes from within, but it was somebody on the outside going, you are a young woman
354 and a young lady, whether you think so or not, whether you believe it or not, you are a
355 beautiful woman and a child of god. And I went, huh? Just a half inch of—it's I don't
356 know, what's the word? Where somebody else lifted me up and I was able to step up just
357 a little bit more. Somebody opened that door and I was able to push it just a little bit more

358 open. Wow, you mean I have some use here? Um, so I don't call them sponsees, a lot of
359 people around here call them sponsees, I had a lady ask me, well what do you call them
360 then? I said, I call them by name, ladies, women, what...and they're like, oh, yeah. And I
361 piss a lot of people off because I'm very confident in my beliefs. I earned my beliefs the
362 hard way, I got them—you know, I'm one of the blessed people of alcoholics
363 anonymous, I took one bong hit after I walked through the doors of alcoholics
364 anonymous, that was my relapse, quote/unquote relapse. You know, I took one bong
365 hit—it was killer dope, that was the best dope I ever smoked—I was baked, one bong hit
366 and I was baked. But by the grace of alcoholics anonymous, god and alcoholics
367 anonymous, I haven't had to drink or use since then. But, that's I believe that my
368 program, the program that I work, is why I am sober. Because I am very clear about, if
369 you're not honest you'll get loaded and die. Dishonest, loaded, dead, ok...break law,
370 loaded, dead. Fuck around on husband, loaded, dead. You know, that's my, that's where I
371 go. I don't know if that makes any sense. I don't know if I answered the right question.
372 R37: Yeah, it's fine. I feel like I know what you mean, but I want you to say it so I can
373 make sure. When you say that calling them sponsees is degrading—
374 P37: I find it degrading, yes.
375 R38: Why?
376 P38: Because um, I believe it—I view it as name calling.
377 R39: Like, putting someone in their place?
378 P39: It's degrading. To me it's no different and, forgive me to call someone a sponsee is
379 no different than me calling them the N word. It's degrading. Because we come in here
380 damaged already. I came in here with self-esteem that was whale shit. Dig deeper than
381 whale shit, whatever's 20 feet deeper than whale shit, I believed that was where I
382 belonged. And...you know, now you're going to call me a baby or a sponsee? And now
383 you're going to tell me well, now you're just going to hang out with women—fuck you!
384 You're going to kill me! And now you're going to tell me I'm somebodies sponsee? And
385 one of the observations I make today—and this is just an observation, right or wrong,
386 doesn't matter, but I see newcomers—I see women going, hi, I'd like to introduce you to
387 my sponsee over here, and what she's saying, what this woman is saying is, I don't have

388 enough—I'm not good enough myself, I need you to understand that I sponsor, that I've
389 been sober long enough to sponsor, that I'm a good enough person to sponsor, that I work
390 a good program, and this thing has just become an identity, a form, a lifeless form. And
391 now what I've done is I've taken this human, this sick, sad, scared, miserable dying
392 fucking being, and reduced them to something that makes me look better. And now I
393 have all of these little molded, melted sponsees, in my little stable of sponsees. And it's
394 like, no, they lifted me up when I walked in, they called me a lady. Me! A lady! They
395 called me a woman. They called me a woman, they didn't call me a whore or a cunt,
396 which is what I was. Because that's what I am. They called me a lady. And they went,
397 here, we believe in you. Come on, let us love you until you can learn to love yourself.
398 And nowadays it's like, just stay down. It mortifies me. I find alcoholics anonymous
399 today a level of tragic—a tragedy. And then it's like, I don't know. You know...and then
400 oh, sobriety dates. Somebody asked me yesterday, so how much time you got? It was a
401 guy, and I was like, wait a minute, that's none of your fucking business. What it is, is,
402 how much time you got? We're figuring out whose going to be in the power position.
403 Who's gonna be in this power position? Who's gonna be the sponsor and who's gonna be
404 the sponsee. Who's gonna be the mentor, who's gonna be the mentee. Wait a minute!
405 We're all shoulder to shoulder in this universe! We're doing language of the heart here, it
406 doesn't matter who's got more time than us, you know. It's like, unless I've got more
407 time than you my self esteem isn't intact. And that's not how I sponsor. I don't have to
408 sponsor half the county to have self-esteem. I don't have to tell you my sobriety date just
409 to have self-esteem. In fact, I've had more people—I've had more people um, look down
410 their nose at me because of the amount of time I have, because I'm supposed to act better
411 with this amount of sobriety. I'm not supposed to—you know, gee, if I had you're
412 sobriety I'd fucking be loaded—if you had my sobriety you'd fucking be alive, you prick.
413 But you get these snot-nosed newcomers, and you just gently remind them, it's ok, you
414 will never ever have to worry about having this much time with that attitude.
415 R40: Wow, that's—I never thought about that. That it could be used to sort of, beat you
416 with.

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417 P40: Oh yeah, I get told, how in the world could you possibly understand how I feel at
418 one week sober, how could you possibly remember that? Oh, believe me, I remember it. I
419 remember it like it was yesterday because I remember my last drunk. S- Lodge, room
420 125. I can tell you the story. I can tell you about all the blood on the walls and the mirror.
421 But yeah, but that's a little bit of my experience.

422 R41: But you do sponsor though, you just don't call those women your sponsees?
423 They're women. They're ladies. Are they friends?

424 P41: If I introduce—generally if I'm out in public, just out of respect for people's level of
425 privacy, and just being considerate, I'll generally introduce, hey this is my friend Suzy, or
426 whatever—I don't generally think it's anybody's business who I sponsor. If you want to
427 tell somebody I sponsor you I don't care, that's fine I have no problem with it. But I don't
428 believe it's my place to tell people who I sponsor, I mean, that's between me and her.
429 That's a private relationship, that's a private thing. Um, it's not super secret squirrel
430 confidential, but I've also had people go oh, B's your sponsor? Ew. Cause I'm kind of a
431 hard nose. But you know what they say about hard noses. You know what's the
432 difference between hard noses and others?

433 R42: Tell me.

434 P42: Hard noses stay sober.

435 R43: So when you do book work, it can be like a spontaneous, let's just crack the book.
436 This doesn't mean that we're like, getting married or—

437 P43: Right, no. Nor does it mean I'm going to marry your firstborn male child. It's a
438 fucking book! It's no different than saying oh, here's the bible. We're having a
439 conversation, it's like, we watched Noah last night on television, whose Methuselah?
440 Let's find out, open the bible—it wasn't in there, but. Oh, you're having a resentment,
441 whether it's male, female or ape, I don't care, I'm not prejudiced, I'll do steps with
442 anybody. What's the line, I'm sorry, was there a rule? There's not. Um, and then what
443 happens, inevitably, inevitably followed by still—it's not inevitable, but I've had it
444 happen just recently, where somebody's sponsor comes to me and says, now, now! Don't
445 you worry, she's on-duh-duh-duh, and she's working on this step. Just recently I had this
446 woman, and she's bounced in and out, but she can't stay sober. And I said, you need to

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447 do an inventory—she’s never done one, never done one! Always spends six months on
448 step one, but believe me she knows she’s an addict, and I said to her, you might want to
449 start a fourth step—and that was all I ever said to her, and her sponsor came to me
450 specifically and said, now so and so is—we’ve got her working on step one and don’t you
451 worry about it, you need to just not worry about her, I’m on top of it. And I just went,
452 OK.

453 R44: So that’s that ownership thing. I mean, as though that woman couldn’t say it to
454 you—or couldn’t, I mean, if she didn’t want your opinion, she could say, thanks for your
455 opinion, but—

456 P44: Yeah, but she keeps reaching out to me!

457 R45: But then her babysitter would come and intercede on her behalf.

458 P45: Her owner! What they do is they take an ownership today. And its like, wow, this
459 isn’t about getting a new puppy. It’s about trudging the road of happy destiny together.
460 We’re in the same boat. We’re all in the same—there is no us and them. But yeah, it’s
461 interesting. And I piss a lot of people off. There are a lot of people in this area that don’t
462 like me because I piss a lot of people off. And I’m ok with that. My ego is, my happiness
463 and my serenity and my ego does not depend on their acceptance in any way, shape or
464 form. I’m a good person, I know I’m a good person.

465 R46: So you have the strength of your convictions, you said that you earned your
466 opinions and it works. But you also, I imagine, need support. So how do you get support?

467 P46: I have support. My sponsor and my mentors are people that have thirty-plus years of
468 sobriety. My sponsor got sober the same way I did. She got drug out of a motel room. But
469 see what...you know, this was sober back then. It’s different today. And us old people,
470 we talk about the same—believe me, we all bitch about the snot-nosed newcomers and
471 we all say the same thing—that AA has changed. And the women that I run with, these
472 are women that are not medicated, that are not, you know—that don’t go—these are
473 women that...I don’t know. I don’t know where I was going with that.

474 R47: So you have—you’re entire adult life has been sober.

475 P47: Yes. I’ve never bought a legal drink.

476 R48: Yeah, which is like—I mean that’s just an interesting experience. And I’m
477 wondering now, if this is a product of AA being different or being watered down.
478 Because what you’re saying is, you get a lot of women talking about how they need
479 young people’s meetings, or women’s meetings because they get shit from the oldtimers
480 who say, “I spilled more than you drank,” or whatever, but that doesn’t sound like it’s
481 part of your story.

482 P48: I disagree with it entirely. I think that young people’s meetings are terrible. I think
483 it’s a terrible idea to have a young people’s meeting, then you have a whole bunch of
484 young people—they herd! They herd and they pack up like wild dogs, and then they do
485 things like think! (laughter) And they have things like ideas, you know? And I think
486 um—you know, then they think hey, let’s have a volleyball game! And then she’s hurt
487 and he breaks his and it’s all his fault and then he’s fucking her and she’s fucking him
488 and then the whole group is involved. And I just sit back and go, well, what did you
489 expect? Yeah, and I mean, there’s a time and a place—yeah. I’m very grateful that they
490 didn’t have young people’s meetings in AA or NA when I got sober, because it would
491 have just allowed me to stay in my own shitty behavior. I had adults that were lifting me
492 up, that were raising my bar, that were saying no, B-, we don’t behave that way. No, B-,
493 we don’t flash tits in our meetings. Yes, that’s what I was doing. No B-, we don’t steal
494 the seventh tradition. Nowadays they want to take you to jail for stealing the seventh
495 tradition! In my day, when I stole the seventh tradition they said pay it back! And now
496 they don’t let them be treasurer anymore—I was forced to stay the treasurer because
497 number one, they knew I’d never steal again and number two, they knew that I’d never
498 steal it again! And that’s how I learned cash register honesty. That’s how they taught me,
499 was forcing me. They didn’t give me a choice—I’ll turn over the treasury because I’m
500 just getting honest and I need to make an amends and I need to not be the treasurer
501 anymore—no! You’re going to keep doing it and you’re going to learn how to be honest
502 and you’re going to learn to resist the urge to steal that money. And you’re going to learn
503 things like financial responsibility and you’re going to get a fucking job and you’re going
504 to pay your way and you’re going to keep that money separate from your money. Oh, oh.

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505 R49: You know what that makes me think of, and this is something that I was trying to
506 formulate the other day—so, a lot of people say, well I use AA everywhere in my life.
507 But you're actually talking about um—AA isn't like, something that happens when you
508 go to a meeting. You're living AA 24 hours a day.

509 P49: Don't apply the steps to your life, apply your life to the steps.

510 R50: Yeah, there's something to that. So that then, I mean like, your sponsor taking you
511 grocery shopping when you're seventeen and you don't know how, is program.

512 P50: I didn't admit that. I didn't admit that—I watched her. She went grocery shopping
513 and I watched her. Nowadays they say, put your hand in your sponsor's pocket, so I'd
514 hang out with these oldtimers—it wasn't just my sponsor, it was anybody. So I'd hang
515 out with her, she'd go grocery shopping—I mean, I was never outright about it, like, I
516 don't know how to grocery shop, but I'd do things like, stand back and watch. You know.
517 And I'd do things like come over here and sneak in and look at that grocery list, like,
518 what do people put on grocery lists? What do real people, what do normal people eat for
519 dinner? Oh wow, she put tampons on her grocery list. You mean, you don't shoplift
520 those? Holy shit, she put them in the basket! Who knew! That's how it was for me.

521 R51: And that was like—that's part of your program is learning how to be a human
522 being.

523 P51: That is the program. All of these girls coming in that I sponsor and I mentor, they
524 don't know it either. They're not ignoring us when they're over here talking to the boys.
525 They're backing up listening to our conversations listening. We're not going to admit,
526 hey I don't know a goddamn fucking thing about having a relationship, so what I'm
527 going to do is I'm gonna back up to this man and this woman and I'm gonna watch them,
528 because I'm not going to admit that I don't know how to have a marriage, they watch,
529 they watch. That's why it's so important for us to model good behavior for our children
530 and model good behavior. I don't care how fricking good you can look for an hour in that
531 meeting. I want to know what your house looks like, I want to know what you do—you
532 know, any time you walk through that door—now, I haven't had a home in a while. I
533 have one now, um, anytime you walk through my door I'm gonna be pretty much doing
534 the same damn thing. That means that it's perfectly OK for you to show up unannounced.

535 Because B- is gonna be there hanging out doing something. Probably doing her laundry.
536 There's probably a coffee pot, or coffee made somewhere. If not there will be coffee
537 shortly. Or a cup of tea. And there's food in the fridge. And there's probably a big book
538 somewhere near by. And that's the way I was raised. You have a big book in every
539 fucking room. And if you don't, there's something seriously wrong with you. Why don't
540 you have a big book in every room? Why don't you have a meditation book sitting next
541 to your toilet? Cause if nothing else, there is two things you're gonna do regularly every
542 day, and that's poop and read the meditation book. And when I got sober it was the 24
543 hour a day book and that's still what I read. It's not next to my toilet though. Not yet. It
544 was in my last house though. I didn't have a toilet until recently. You know, that's what
545 you do. And if you don't, why not? I've got a big book in my saddle bag.

546 R52: There's just, um...loving—like, you really, you know a lot of the stuff gets said so
547 much I think maybe people stop hearing it. Like, practice these principles in all our
548 affairs, like all the time—you're always doing the work.

549 P52: Want to know what happens when I don't? I start to think. Roulette wheel, ball falls
550 in the slot—ah, maybe, maybe I should move to Montana. Gee I think I'll—oh god, it's
551 always dangerous when B- has that, gee, I think I'll—anything. Maybe I should—god,
552 what now? She's thinking!

553 R53: Well, how do you function if—I mean, you do have to make choices.

554 P53: Sure.

555 R54: Whether you pray about the first, or talk to your sponsor, you do have to make
556 choices.

557 P54: About what?

558 R55: I don't know—

559 P55: About whether or not to poop? I know when I have to poop.

560 R56: OK, so for example, you've talked about school, like for you, you were forced to go
561 to school. Some people have to make that choice themselves for whatever reason, or
562 whether to have a baby, or whatever.

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563 P56: Why? My friend T- decided to have a baby. They don't have a baby yet, but he sure
564 made that decision. I can plan the plan, I can make a plan. I don't plan the outcome
565 though.

566 R57: But you have to think to make a plan.

567 P57: Not necessarily. I take a group conscience. When you've got fifteen people saying
568 B-, you need to go to school, I think it's probably a good idea to go to school.

569 R58: So you rely on your mentors and your sponsor.

570 P58: Yeah, because god speaks to me through others. If I had fifteen people saying, B-, I
571 think it's a really good idea for your to go jump off that bridge, I would probably think
572 about it.

573 R59: So when you say you get in trouble when you start musing, like, what if I move out
574 of B-, I'm not that comfortable here, it's too liberal, then you would run that by your
575 sponsor and maybe a handful of other people you trust.

576 P59: Sure, and the first thing I'd do is I'd go, I'm thinking about moving out of
577 Bellingham, and the first question in her mind—out of her mouth better be, why? Well,
578 because I just really don't like it here. Which is exactly how I got here. And so, because I
579 just really don't like it here. Well, have you prayed about it? Yeah. OK, well do you have
580 a job somewhere else? Do you have a place to live somewhere else? Well, no. OK, how
581 about if we just try first, apply for a job in Denver, for example. And then if you actually
582 get a job, then maybe that's an indicator that a door is opening there.

583 R60: So this is like, this is as practical as learning how to grocery shop from somebody
584 who knows how to do it. You rely on people for that kind of practical guidance, checking
585 your motives.

586 P60: Well, I mean, I do it myself because I was taught. This is what I was taught—I'm
587 thinking about moving to Oregon, ok why? Well, number one, there's a school there that
588 I can go to. Number two, there's a him. There's always a him. Sometimes moving is a
589 really good idea. But believe me, I don't think about drinking too much today. But I
590 certainly think about loading up my saddle bags and going on the road. Oh man, I could
591 do that. Yeah, you know what, San Diego looks really nice, really nice. Or someplace

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592 shortly there out of. Because it ain't here. Here I have these feelings about Jeff, about
593 work, about them about love about this about that, about AA.

594 R61: So you're also talking about—it sounds like you've learned to slow yourself down
595 and have your default setting be to not do anything.

596 P61: When in doubt, punt. When in doubt, do nothing. Yeah. When I'm having second
597 thoughts, god gives us a feather or a brick, you know. A feather or a brick. My sponsor
598 said, gee B-, you might want to wait to marry him. There's a 500 pound gorilla at the end
599 of that road. It's ok, I know how to get around him this time. And 95 days later he was
600 laying dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the brain. In my bathroom. People are
601 sometimes quite right about my life. I made the decision to marry him. Decisions based
602 in self. But he's so nice! And I love him and he loves me! That's where my decision-
603 making skills get me. And he was wonderful. And I was convinced, he was amazing. Had
604 a good job, new house, new car, new bike. Handsome as the day is long, god, he was
605 great in bed. Fabulous guy, he was charming, didn't have a gray hair in his head. Didn't
606 have a fucking gray hair in that man's head. And he didn't have a gray hair when he was
607 laying dead in the bathroom either. And that's what twenty years of sobriety can get me.
608 This is not—my problem is not alcohol. Alcohol is not our problem. I have a problem
609 with my head. Seventeen years sober, and I'm running in self. Me thinking about me.
610 How are we doing so far?

611 R62: Good! I knew I wanted to hear your perspective, because um—I'm trying not to
612 overthink this, I'm trying to just take it in.

613 P62: I can only suppose that I have a lot of different beliefs than other people.

614 R63: Well, I mean in some ways. But there's just something so, like—

615 P63: Redneck.

616 R64: Just totally practical. Just practical. Which is—

617 P64: When you're hungry eat. When you're sad, cry. When you're horny, jack off or get
618 laid (laughter). But for god sakes, when you're an alcoholic don't drink because you'll
619 die. If you're lonely, reach out. If you're scared, get on your knees and reach out. And
620 remember, always that no matter what, it's gonna be ok. God's not gonna drop me on my
621 head. But don't drink or use. Just don't drink or use and there's hope.

622 R65: So, there's no thinking required in that recipe.

623 P65: There is none. Drinking and using is no longer an option for me. Thank god for that
624 one. Now, I could sit here and think about drinking. Geez, a bottle of this and a bottle of
625 that—and nowadays that have very pretty little bottles, they've got blue bottles and green
626 bottles—they've got whipped cream flavored vodka for god's sake! Do you know what a
627 cream-sickle would taste like? Getting shitfaced and knee-walking drunk in a five
628 thousand dollar ball gown? Drinking vodka-whipped cream flavored creamsicles? I can
629 mentally masturbate. I can sit her like, fuck! Even I want a drink! I'm really curious to
630 know what Zima's taste like! Or what is that other shit? It's got a long name—
631 Jagermeister! We didn't have that! But I've heard it tastes like black licorice. I'd just
632 hurl. You know. And I mean, they make it very pretty now days. And if I sit here long
633 enough and play with the idea, sure I want to drink. And that's part of the problem.
634 We've got people coming in here, and they're fucking dying, and they're wanting to die
635 and wanting to drink and not knowing whether to wind their butt or scratch their watches.
636 And then people say, now you need to spend at least 40 days doing your first step, you
637 know? So 45 days later and this little fuckstick can't figure out why he's calling his
638 dealer—this was my experience last week—little whatzisface, so I said fine, call your
639 dealer here's a phone. And he said, but that's not really what I want, and I said, so then
640 are you ready to get into some work? And I put him into the big book and said, ok, and
641 we went all the way through the big book into step four, got him into step four and then
642 he calls his sponsor—his year and half sober snot-nosed sponsor, snot-nosed newcomer
643 sponsor says, no, no, no! You're working on step one! This kid is almost a year and a half
644 sober and has never done an inventory, and he's calling me going, B-, what the fuck do I
645 do? And I bit my tongue, out of respect for—and I went against my better judgment, and
646 I'm kind of kicking myself, and said, you do what your sponsor tells you.

647 R66: So it sounds like—and I'm sort of reading between the lines here, but it sounds like
648 you don't like a lot of people, but you'll help anybody.

649 P66: Absolutely. I don't have to like you. They didn't like me! And I had people there,
650 and they looked beyond the bitch that I was—I couldn't carry on a conversation without
651 using fifteen different four-letter words—

652 R67: So, that's probably the area where you've made the least progress (laughter). I'm
653 kidding.

654 P67: Hey! Water seeks it's own level, pumpkin. You know, if I could quit swearing, I'd
655 probably get my way into heaven. I was hanging out with my little Christian friends.
656 They're very like—pray before food, and pray before—everything's praying. Anyway, I
657 absolutely lost my train of thought. Oh yeah, I said, I said I'd be a great Christian if only I
658 could quit cussing! And then I throw funny little words at them like, god is either
659 everything or he is nothing. And Joel, he's really Christian, he's a great guy, I really
660 admire him. And actually we were talking about Jeff and, god is either everything or he is
661 nothing and I get to hit them with some AA stuff and we're all singing the same tune.
662 God is either everything or I'd be dead. I have experiential knowledge, they have
663 theoretical knowledge. I have experience, they have—experience versus, what's the other
664 one?

665 R68: Oh...I'm not sure what word you're looking for, but you mean experience versus
666 like, insight?

667 P68: Sure. Experience versus knowledge. I always think about the story of the orgasm.

668 R69: The story of the orgasm? I'm not sure I've heard this.

669 P69: Anybody can study the book, the big book, it's like, twin boys want to learn about
670 an orgasm. One goes to school, he goes all through college and gets a PhD and learns all
671 the physiological aspects of an orgasm. And his twin brother goes and gets a girlfriend
672 (laughter). Knowledge, experience. I have a lot, a lot of experience. And actually, that's
673 another piece of me. Um...I've buried both my parents, I've buried two men, I've buried
674 a brother. I've been through car wrecks and deaths and cancer. I've survived cancer
675 twice. Stupid little piece of shit cancer, but I'm a survivor they tell me. And surgeries and
676 painkillers and love and hate and work and no work....success, failure, food no food.
677 Rich, poor. I've done it all—sober. I haven't jumped out of a plane yet. I have a shit ton,
678 as they say nowadays, of experience. And I've, by the grace of god and alcoholics
679 anonymous alone, I've been allowed—allowed to stay sober through him, and clean. And
680 um, had the big AA wedding and the big AA divorce. A couple of them. Working on one
681 now. And uh, it'll be OK. And I know that no matter what, it'll be OK. Just don't drink or

682 use. And I learned a very good lesson seeing my husband who, eleven days prior,
683 celebrated 20 years of stone cold clean and sober—or so he said—eleven days after he
684 turned 20 years sober, he ate a shotgun in my bathroom. My freshly remodeled,
685 redecorated bathroom, did I mention that? I looked forever for a throw rug for that
686 bathroom. I was pissed. I'm still pissed about the carpet. I'm still pissed. Sorry, it's a
687 resentment. I refuse to give it up. Just in principle. He was a piece of shit, but god dammit
688 I liked the carpet. Um, and that's the deal. And what that did was—all kidding aside, I
689 saw this person who was 20 years stone cold mother fucking sober, this ain't about
690 drinking. OK. Wow. You know, it told me a lot. That you know, is sober, aint sober. Is
691 honest, aint honest. He wasn't working program, he wasn't practicing principles.
692 Honesty, integrity, willingness. He was looking really good. Man we were doing high
693 profile AA and going to meetings and being of service, chairing meetings, by god, we
694 were looking really good in the rooms of alcoholics anonymous. But he wasn't being
695 honest, he was leading a double life. See, it all came out after he died, the truth. And the
696 truth was, he had his recovery life, the people in recovery that knew him as Mr. Clean
697 plumber Dave. And then there was the reality, and the reality was way different. And I
698 got to learn very up close and personal that this is do it or die. And it was god reminding
699 me 17 years sober, that I ain't out of the woods. Nobodies out of the woods in this deal.
700 You don't hit some amount of sober time and think, ok, I've made it, I can relax now.
701 And I always thought that was how it was. That some day, you crossed that line of...but
702 you don't.

703 R70: So it must be hard for you—I mean, I don't know that it's like a struggle, but it
704 sounds like it comes up sometimes—I'm interested in the example of this guy whose
705 really in danger of relapsing and he comes to you for help and repeatedly he's reaching
706 out to you, and you try to help him—

707 P70: I offer him what was given to me.

708 R71: You offer him what was given to you—which, you have like, shit tons of evidence
709 that it works—and you really like, want to give it away, and yet at the same time, you
710 have to say, or for whatever reason you say, ok listen to your sponsor.

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711 P71: You know why? You know why I don't fight it? It's a very sticky place...he's on
712 mental health meds. He's on antidepressants. And we are not doctors, and if I say a word
713 pretty soon somebodies going to be on the the phone to B-, saying B-, you're not a
714 doctor!

715 R72: Oh. And you've got to—I mean, those kinds of guidelines exist for a reason,
716 because there's got to be a part of your mind where you don't know—you've got to have
717 humility, right? So I have—you can only give away what you have, and the experience
718 you've had and what has worked for you. But you can't insist that you have—

719 P72: The answer?

720 R73: For everybody. Yeah.

721 P73: You're right. You're right.

722 R74: I mean, it sounds like a place of tension.

723 P74: You're right. Yesterday—where was I, yesterday I was riding my motorcycle.
724 Before D- killed himself he had been in a motorcycle accident. I have PTSD really bad.
725 And as I'm riding, because I ended up riding with some people and I didn't really want
726 to, but as I'm riding I'm in the same position I was in when I watched Dave dive off of
727 his motorcycle in an effort to commit suicide. He crashed his motorcycle before he
728 committed suicide, trying to kill himself. Hindsight's 20/20. So is inventory. And I was
729 having flashbacks on my bike yesterday. It was wild, they were pretty bad. And it's like,
730 wow, I get the opportunity to learn how to walk myself through that and bring myself
731 back. And I can ask god, like it says in the big book on page whatever the hell it is
732 because I'm a really bad big book quoter, and it says, we pause when agitated or doubtful
733 and ask for the right thought or inspiration, and here we go, I'm having flashbacks, and I
734 know what's going on because I've got some self-knowledge. I know, I recognize what's
735 going on. OK well, what do I need to do? Do I need to pull over and focus myself and get
736 my shit together, if you will? What do I need to do? And I say, god damn it B-, your
737 brain is still alive and well, so I say, OK god, walk me through this, don't let me run into
738 anybody. And it's like, ok, well, if the guy up there crashes he crashes, you know, my
739 visualization was somebody flopping down the highway at 90 miles an hour, you know.
740 And it's like, well, wow, the PTSD is still alive and well. And then anxiety attacks, the

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741 last one was just driving my car, and my heart goes, bumpity, bumpity, ahh! Wow! OK,
742 what's really going on here? That's what I did yesterday, what's going on here? OK,
743 well, I've watched a lot of people crash, I'm sick of watching people die. OK, well, I've
744 been through this, what's really going on here, well, the odds of that guy up there
745 crashing are slim to none. OK, why is my heart going like this, well, I'm going into an
746 anxiety-ridden circumstance. A very intense situation, and well, OK, of course you're
747 having an anxiety attack. Nowadays we call it anxiety, in the big book they call it fear.
748 Nowadays they call it depression, in the big book we call it self-pity. But don't you
749 see...I have issues! You know, I can issue myself right into the fucking grave. And that's
750 what I see people doing. Baby S, god bless her, she's issuing herself into the fucking
751 grave. Mama S- did it last year. I have issues! I have um, I have—we used to call it dual
752 diagnosis—I have a co-occurring disorder! Yeah, the big book works for that too,
753 pumpkin! And then, there is a line, that you were talking about. My friend Billy, when he
754 didn't take his happy pills he would talk to his hands and they would answer. And he
755 would be in meetings having conversations with his hands. There is a time and a place for
756 mental health meds, absolutely, oh god yes. But what Billy did is when he got sober he
757 worked with his doctor, and he did a complete physical inventory with his doctor and I
758 don't know that he got completely off, but he got a baseline, and I don't know how to talk
759 about it right, but he got a baseline so he knew, what is the right level of meds for Billy—
760 R75: So that he could do the program—
761 P75: So he could get it as much as he could.
762 R76: So for you it's important to not, not use meds as a crutch instead of the steps.
763 What's important to me is that we give the program and opportunity to work first and
764 then if we still need meds—because this is a program, this is a book that doesn't
765 information, this book transmits a spiritual experience. It transmits an experience,
766 spiritual, a phenomenon, that is beyond stuff we can comprehend. I've seen it give people
767 their eyesight back. I've seen it create lives. I've seen people go from railroad cars to
768 Boeing executives. I've seen me go from a dope-shooting two dollar loser, a whore, to
769 where I am today. Which is, oh yeah, unemployed, unloved...almost divorced. Yeah, I'm
770 a high quality person today and you can be like me! I'm kidding. I actually have a really

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771 good life. I'm blessed beyond my wildest dreams. Anything I deserve, that's for damn
772 sure. But I just encourage people to do that physical inventory. Because most of the
773 time—and it talks about this in the big book—most of the time we ain't being honest with
774 my psychiatrist anyway! Because you show me somebody—how can you have any
775 integrity in your diagnosis of bipolar if you don't know this guy shot half a pound of
776 meth into his arm before he walked into your office? Well, he's not going to tell you but
777 he walks in and goes—and he 's talking to trees. And of course you're going to diagnose
778 bipolar. But they're very quick to diagnose bipolar and get those pills into them. And also
779 I think, I blame a lot of it on the pharmaceutical companies and I also blame a lot of it on
780 the doctors, because these days it's more easier to—it's easy for you to walk into my
781 office and me to go, OK, take this pill, it will help. Instead of getting down to the causes
782 and conditions and going, really, huh, I'm looking at your eyes, you're looking a little
783 spooked out, when was the last time you shot some meth? I don't smoke meth! Oh yeah?
784 Let's call mom. Hey, mom is Junior—junior is so strung out he doesn't know whether to
785 shit twice or die! You know, let's get down to the honesty. Because I don't know about
786 you, but I feel better when they get that prescription pad out.

787 R77: Do you encourage your sp—your ladies you work with (laughter)—

788 P77: It's hard isn't it?

789 R78: It is hard. Because it's pervasive, it's everywhere. But I really like the idea of not
790 labeling, it's more communal, like we're all in this together.

791 P78: It's loving. It's about love, love is the answer.

792 R79: Yeah. So when somebody has asked you to be their sponsor or their mentor, or they
793 say they're working with you, do you encourage them to not take medication?

794 P79: I don't encourage them one way or the other. I don't tend to go into a sponsorship
795 relationships, I will keep my distance with people that do meds. I'm sick of going there,
796 I'm sick of it. I'm sick of it. And so um, what I do encourage everybody is, I encourage
797 everybody, gay or straight to do a sex inventory. And on the lesbians that I've sponsored
798 or the bisexuals that I've sponsored, they say that I'm only saying that because they're
799 gay. And then I encourage everybody to do a physical inventory—how's my body, what
800 am I putting into my body, how's my food? Am I getting enough exercise, how's my

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801 food pyramid? Because this is the stuff that I was taught. I gained about ten extra pounds
802 the last couple of months. I got my ass to the gym this morning. That's my physical
803 inventory, it's called being honest. Rigorous honesty involves my body. When was the
804 last time you went to the doctor and had an annual exam? What's your doctor telling you,
805 what's your blood sugar? And part of that is what kind of medications am I putting into
806 my body? Am I overusing ibuprofen? Am I taking vitamins? I've never taken vitamins
807 which is probably bad which is probably why my back is breaking. I don't encourage one
808 way or the other, and when I run into, when I start talking about—you need to do the
809 physical inventory, you need to do the meds inventory with your doctor and take a look at
810 that stuff, um, anybody on meds says, you're just saying that cuz you're antimedts! And I
811 say, leave. Fuck you. What I have seen, my observation is um—I don't know how to say
812 it because I don't talk about it too much...I needed to—for me, I need to feel, and I
813 needed to feel like that absolute piece of whale shit, bottom of the barrel, I needed every
814 fucking feeling, every—all of that snot slinging emotion, fetal position on the couch for a
815 year—which I did—I needed that. And what I needed was, when they finally got sick of
816 listening to me whine—gosh B-, is it possible maybe it's time to do some inventory
817 again. I needed that emotion, those feelings. I needed to be present for those feelings
818 because that pain, that gut-wrenching hellfire fuck the world pain is what motivated me
819 to get better. And it is my observation that we've got a whole shit ton full of people
820 coming in now that are medicated that don't feel that level of pain so we've got them not
821 getting any better. So like such and such last week, sitting there getting ready to call his
822 dope dealer because he's not feeling the pain. But don't you know, I have anxiety issues!
823 If I go off my meds I totally won't be—if I go off my meds I can't be a mom to my kid!
824 And I go, and if you're dead you can't be a mom to your kids either, because you're
825 going to be shooting dope in a fucking gallery again and you're going to be dead of a
826 heroin overdose. Oh, but god dammnit you be present for that kid on the painkillers, the
827 antidepressants or whatever. If I don't take my antidepressants I'll end up on the couch
828 and I can't be a mom to my kid. I'm like, you know what, we are two fucking blocks
829 away from the emergency room if it gets that bad. We have this beautiful thing these days
830 called 911, if you get too crazy like a shithouse rat, we can call 911, we can call the guys

831 with the rubber—with the butterfly nets. We'll get you right back on them meds if you
832 get that bad! But, that's just outlandish, that B- would say such a thing. No! And what
833 we're talking about really, what it gets down to, when you cut through all of the bullshit
834 it boils down to one word. Fear. Fear. That's OK, we've got a step for that. Oh, my god,
835 what if I find myself depressed. What if I try to kill myself? I promise you, if you try to
836 kill yourself we'll get you to the hospital. If you really want to kill yourself you won't tell
837 anybody and you'll go do it. I've seen that. They're not calling their sponsor saying, I'm
838 thinking about killing myself, you know? But they use that big S word, and we're so
839 afraid of that S word—I'm going to commit suicide! And the last person on earth I'm
840 going to call if I want to commit suicide or drink is my fucking sponsor! I'm gonna go
841 hang myself in the god damn closet! With a bottle! That's what I'm gonna do if I want to
842 drink. If I wanna drink I'm certainly not calling you. That's what I told whatzizbutt the
843 other day. I said, if you really wanted to use or drink you wouldn't be on the phone with
844 me. I said, you're doing attention getting behavior. I am? I said, yes! Because you sure
845 wouldn't be talking to that bitch, B-, he said, my god, you're right. I said, yeah, you
846 really want to go get loaded? He said, no. I said, you're right. Try a fucking inventory.
847 Well, my sponsor put me on step one, what do I do? Shoot your sponsor? Kill yourself?
848 And what do I tell him? Do whatever your sponsor says. Try not to get loaded while
849 you're spending six months on step way, like you've been spending a year and a half on
850 step one. God I'm an asshole.

851 R80: Well, I mean, you kind of have an obligation to share what you know.

852 P80: That's all I've got.

853 R81: So, we've been talking for an hour and half, but there's one thing I want to ask you.
854 You've kind of been talking about it, but so AA has changed and not for the better in
855 your opinion. So there are all kinds of challenges and you get frustrated and you have to
856 deal with that. So, how do you choose a meeting? How do YOU choose a meeting? You
857 look at the schedule, given this watered down state of AA, how do you choose a meeting?

858 P81: There's no such thing as a bad meeting. Um, talks about it on page whatever in the
859 fourth edition. The glass in my glass I backwards, you know, I can go in seeing all the
860 bad shit in the meeting, or I can go in going hey, what can I contribute? See, if I'm just

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861 going in to take and you fuckers aren't giving me anything, then I go fuck you I'm outta
862 here. If I go in going what do I have to contribute? To give? Gee, do I get to hear
863 something? I get to hear something. There's no bad meetings. There are meetings that I
864 prefer. Um, because some of them tend to get a little ratty, same person saying the same
865 thing. I got a good taste of him today, he pissed me off. But anyway, I know what it looks
866 like inside of his house. And I know he doesn't practice what he preaches. He looks
867 really good sitting in meetings with his time, but he doesn't have a sponsor, he doesn't
868 work steps, he doesn't do twelve step work. I know because I called him today about a
869 twelve step call and he couldn't be bothered. And believe me I wanted to tell him just
870 what I thought, and I didn't because I had a really hardcore twelve step call on the phone
871 and I needed to deal with it. But believe me, I will do some serious praying for him! And
872 if I knew who his sponsor, if he had a sponsor I would be on the god damn phone with
873 him.

874 R82: So it sounds like sometimes you choose meetings not because they're good but
875 because you feel like you have something to offer.

876 P82: I choose meetings because—I just sort of end up at meetings. What part of town am
877 I in? What day is it? Um, you know? It's 9 on a Saturday, well the only thing available
878 is—ok, do you want to go to a meeting Friday night what's available? And I taking the
879 car or the bike, if I'm taking the bike I might go a little further. God puts me where I'm
880 supposed to be. I've walked into a men's meeting before and been welcomed! That's
881 another thing they don't do that they used to do. I walk into a men's meeting and I'm
882 like, I'm sorry I didn't realize this was a men's meeting—I'm out of here, and they're
883 like, no no no! If your ass is falling off, you're welcome to stay.

884 R83: I saw that happen in Pittsburgh at a women's meeting, a man showed up.

885 P83: You think that'll happen here?

886 R84: It won't? People are going to protect their women's meeting?

887 P84: Nope. Principles before personalities.

888 R85: I was so impressed when I watched that happen, there was not a woman in there—

889 P85: Principles before personalities. But you won't see that here. I've had elder members
890 tell me that they won't listen—won't talk to a wet drunk on the phone. Because I do the

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891 twelve step all list, and she's like, if they're still drunk don't call me. I've watched
892 people...you know, oh just take them to a meeting. Back in the old days we didn't take
893 them to meetings until they had at least a week sober. Nowadays it's like, let's take them
894 to a meeting! It's like, wait a minute, the guy is still half shitfaced!!
895 R86: So what are you doing there? You get a twelve step call and then—
896 P86: Sober them up on your couch!
897 R87: Sober them up and then you get them in the book?
898 P87: 24 hours! Age limits don't—there's not age limit, time limit, this whole, how much
899 time you got is made up, man made. Somebody's opinion, you know—men work with
900 men, women work with women—somebodies opinion! No relationships in the first year
901 of sobriety—somebodies opinion! That aint in the book. None of that is in the book! Why
902 aren't you on the twelve step call list? Because I'm not on the twelfth step yet, I'm still
903 working on step one—you've been sober for fifteen years!
904 Ew. OK, I'm gonna go play over here where people stay sober. I'm asshole. I'm not
905 worried about being an asshole today.
906 R88: Well, you're not afraid to speak up.
907 P88: nobody was afraid to tell me the truth, in fact—somebody said, you know I would
908 rather tell somebody the truth and have them hate me than to give them a sunshine enema
909 and watch them fucking die. And they loved me enough to tell me the truth. Whether it
910 hurt my feelings or not. Like, I totally have boundaries today! What the fuck is a
911 boundary?? Let me know how that boundary works for you when you're shitfaced.
912 R89: Is there anything else you think I need to think about in my efforts to describe
913 sobriety?
914 P89: No, I just think that we need to have a movement in AA. We need a whole bunch of
915 people singing the same tune. And there's a few of us. There's two meetings in this town
916 that do it, that spiritual honesty, that rigorous honesty. Nowadays you have spiritual
917 permission, but you get enough people out there with spiritual honesty and somebody's
918 gonna get sober! Um, all I know is that, all I can do is teach the women that I sponsor and
919 teach the women that I mentor and say hey, this is what I've done. This has managed to
920 work for me for...a while. You know?

921 [End of interview].

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1 R1: OK, so we're recording. This is really straight-forward, Please talk about your
2 experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience working the steps with a
3 sponsor. Feel free to share anything you think will help me understand what it was like
4 getting sober as a woman in Alcoholics Anonymous.

5 P1: Now?

6 R2: Yes, ready set go.

7 P2: OK. Hi, my name is J- and I'm an alcoholic. Um, my sobriety date is April the 22nd,
8 1979, so I've been sober over 35 years. Got sober in W, in B-. My first meeting was in B-
9 , and the way that came about is, I was raised in an alcoholic home. I had a violent
10 alcoholic father. He was a world war 2 veteran who had come back after seeing atrocities
11 that shouldn't be seen by anybody. And I now know that he was very mentally ill and
12 broken. He was like that as long as I knew him, but my mother reported that he was not
13 that way when she married him. Which may or may not have been true. She might not
14 have known because they weren't married that long and he got enlisted. Um, so, my
15 parents—I was born in Rochester, in—my parents lived with my grandparents in
16 Rochester, and that is because my father had just gotten back from WW2 and they were
17 searching for—they didn't have enough money to find a place of their own and my
18 grandparents had a very lovely, large home and invited them to stay there. So, I was born
19 subsequently after he was back for a while. And I came along and my father drank
20 probably to blot out his memories because he had PTSD and he suffered terrible
21 nightmares and terrible, terrible anxiety all of his life. But my grandparents had been
22 against my mother marrying this man because she hadn't known him very long. He was
23 Scottish, he was born and raised in Scotland and had lost his father when he was 8
24 years old so his mother saved up for about 9 years to emigrate to the US and she brought
25 her five children over here. They landed in Ellis Island and they lodged in New Jersey in
26 a two room tenement. So my father got here when he was 15 years old. And 100 percent
27 of all his siblings, he included, were alcoholic. His sister died as a result of an alcoholic
28 fall right before I was born. So, my father and mother were living with my grandparents.
29 I was born, my mother was really quite a narcissist and thought she was a princess that
30 should be waited on, so my grandmother took over my rearing, my childcare. I called my

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31 grandmother mom, I called my mother Helen. And my dad got some kind of job in a
32 bank, and he didn't have a car, didn't have a license, so he would ride with my
33 grandfather, go downtown and go to his job and return that same way. So I was exactly
34 15 months old to the day and my sister came along. And during this time my father's
35 drinking had progressed to the point where it was apparently very obvious to everybody.
36 So they decided they'd move out west because they'd heard wonderful things about
37 California. So my father was bound for Riverside, and um, he left town soon after my
38 sister was born and he flew out to investigate getting a job in Riverside and sending for
39 us. Well, his plane laid over in Phoenix overnight, and he liked it so he never left. So
40 when my sister was 4 months old and I was 19 months old, my sister and mom and I flew
41 out to Phoenix and that's where I was raised. And so, my mother was not cut out to be a
42 mother. Because she was the third of four sisters, and her mother was extraordinarily
43 capable, my mother was cut out to be waited on. She featured herself as the third of the
44 four sisters in Little Women, the sickly one, and she got attention by pretending—
45 because everybody doted on her, poor little sickly Helen. And she was always falling
46 down and having terrible contusions so people would feel sorry for her. And that
47 continued throughout her adult life as well. So my earliest remembrances were of my
48 sister being a baby, I was a little toddler about two, and I wasn't walking to take naps.
49 And my mother would want to be lounging or reading a book and these teenage boys
50 would come over and ask if they could play with me and she didn't find that odd. So they
51 would take me around the back—this all came to me, it came to me in sobriety. But
52 anyway, they would take me to a basement and it was dark and they would do things that
53 kids do to little kids at that age. So I grew up with this terror of boys, terror. And feeling I
54 was dirty and just awful and disgusting. And felt like the only person in my life that
55 possibly loved me because she told me so, was my mother. And my mother couldn't
56 tolerate my sister and me fighting as little squabbling kids fighting over a toy. So she'd
57 quite often put on a jacket or a coat and leave J- and me, and say I can't stand being
58 around you, I'm leaving. And we would toddle after her or get on our little tricycles and
59 beg her to come home. So by the time I was four, she was searching for full time work
60 when I was little was rare, because most mothers stayed home. So my mother went to

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61 school, my mother went to work full time when I was four, and I went to school when I
62 was five. And our house was across the street from our grade school, so it was
63 convenient. My mom would see us go across the street and then she would leave for her
64 job. And my father would come home every day at about 5:15 because it took him 15
65 minutes to get off shift and drive home. And we were terrified of my father. He was
66 violent when he was drunk and when he was sober he was irritable, restless, discontent
67 and had no tolerance for children. So both my sister and I felt pretty unlovable that this
68 man could never, in our whole lives he never told us he loved us. He wasn't capable of
69 showing love or—I'm sure he loved us, but we didn't know it and we believed it was us
70 that caused him to drink. So um, my father grew increasingly violent when he would
71 drink and I would rush out of my bedroom, run down the hall to this little living room
72 that we had and I would stand in front of my mom and protect her from him. From the
73 tiniest, like, six years old. And she let me. Because I thought my job was to be my
74 mother's protector. So I didn't really have a childhood. And by the time I was seven she
75 was confiding everything in me, I was her only friend. So I knew stuff about...her misery
76 and her affairs with other men and how awful my father was. But she kept saying, I love
77 you J-, so I was committed to protecting my mother at all costs. My little sister was the
78 lost child and the clown in our family, because there was only two of us, and she would
79 hide under the bed when there was fighting, and she lived in an imaginary world and she
80 still does. Unfortunately. Um, so anyway. I grew up hating alcohol, hating everything
81 about alcohol, vowing I would never drink. And I did not drink all the way through high
82 school. I had a boyfriend, I um, had no religion per se. My mother would take us and
83 drop us off at a Sunday school, but then we'd get in the car and all the violence would
84 erupt and I'd think, well, that was nice but now what. No faith lived out in my home. So,
85 (coughing) excuse me, I have asthma, I'm sorry. So anyway, I grew up and um, was
86 terrified of boys. Found this boy in high school who liked me because I was a good
87 listener. I figured out if you could listen to people they wouldn't ask you about yourself
88 and I'm a good listener. So, he had the gift of gab and he was a drama and speech freak,
89 which I ultimately became as well. And my life with him—I went out with him for two
90 years in high school and lost my virginity to him, and pretty much just listened to him.

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91 But again, it was all about him. And I look back at all the relationships I've had, and it's
92 pretty much always been about the other person. Much like my mother. I find myself
93 drawn to people that are emotionally unavailable or narcissistic, so my picker is pretty
94 sketchy. So um, went off to college and um, I was—I had sang for four years in high
95 school so I was going to always be in concert choir, but I loved speech and I loved drama,
96 so I was going to major in those two subjects, drama and communication, and I was
97 going to minor in English and I set out to be a teacher. Well, freshman year at ASU was
98 huge and I lived in a dorm and that was a very big university and now it's a mega-
99 university. So I ran into some kid I'd known in high school, who was a year older and he
100 said hey, I'm turning out for this debate team, do you want to come? And I had no idea
101 what the debate team was, but it was the first time I'd been invited to do anything besides
102 eat meals in my dorm, so I went to a debate meeting and I thought well all right, this
103 looks like I could do it. And I had no talent, I didn't understand it, I wasn't going to be a
104 political science major, but they paired me with this other girl and she patiently worked
105 with me and it soon became apparent that I had no talent. And this little, fat, bald debate
106 coach came up to me and he said you better go find a sorority or something else because
107 you're never going to make it. Well, I'm stubborn. You don't tell me I'm never going to
108 make it. So I thought, I will just show him. And I burrowed in and I debated for four
109 years and I went to nationals with the debate team when I was a senior with my debate
110 partner who is now a judge in the state of Arizona. All to show this little fat bald [man]
111 that I was going to prove him wrong if it killed me. So, in college it was hard for me to
112 have a normal social life because we'd go away out of state for these tournaments. And
113 so in my sophomore year I kind of got involved with this guy who was on the debate
114 team. He was brilliant, and I now know I think he was a sociopath. But he was taken with
115 me. And you know, I always admired a good mind, intelligence, and um, he was funny
116 and so we started dating. And he rapidly got serious and I wasn't serious about him.
117 Junior year I find myself taking my major courses, my drama and my English solely, and
118 he's a prelaw major and suddenly I find him enrolled in my classes, including stage
119 theater, you know makeup, set construction, oral interpretation. He's taking my classes.
120 And it turns out he's taking them to make sure I don't talk to another man. And he begins

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121 to stalk me and he begins to frighten me. And it got to the point where we'd be going
122 down a street and I'd say, oh, those are cute shoes! And they'd show up on my doorstep
123 the next day. He was buying me. And I was getting increasingly terrified of him. And
124 he'd do things like, he'd put his little hands around my neck and he'd tighten them and
125 he'd say, if I can't have you no one else ever will. And I found that the only time he was
126 tolerable was when I was drinking, which debaters did a ton of. So I'd started drinking
127 when I started college, and I loved what it did for me. Because I could suddenly talk, it
128 was like a cork came out and my inhibitions feel away and I could talk, and I was funny
129 and, you know I felt just, like I was finally a member of the human race. So I liked to
130 drink, and when I was around him I drank a lot. And bad things happened when I drank
131 because my inhibitions would go down and I wouldn't resist him and it was terrible. So,
132 by the end of my junior year I knew I had to get out of this relationship. Because if I
133 wouldn't go out with him on an evening, every evening, he would wait outside my
134 dormitory to see who I came back to the dormitory with to make sure that it was my
135 roommate and not another person that was male. And he would stalk me all the time, and
136 he was in every class and he stopped me from conversations with other people. And I was
137 so ashamed, and I couldn't tell anybody because people on the debate team thought he
138 was brilliant and funny and they thought I was lucky to have such a boyfriend. So, I went
139 home for the summer and the end of that junior year of college and was terrified. We
140 went out the first night I had moved back home and I broke up with him. I said look, I
141 just can't do this relationship, I don't feel the same about you, we're done. So I got out of
142 the car and ran in the house. Well, the next morning—my father always worked on
143 Saturdays because he always got some overtime so he could pay for his extra alcohol
144 which was important to me. So the next morning B- (sorry, you can blank the name)
145 roared into our driveway and left screech marks on the driveway and started pounding on
146 the door about six. Pound, pound, pound, and my father—and this is the first and only
147 time he ever went to bat for me—and he answered the door and ordered him off the
148 property in no uncertain terms. And I was cowering, I was ducking down in the kitchen
149 so nobody could see me, as was my mother because we were both scared of him. And
150 after that time, the neighbors all knew what his car looked like and what it sounded like

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151 and they would all report that he continued to cruise my block, cruise and cruise it. And I
152 had a job that summer that I'd had all through college in the summers and I would drive
153 my mother's car and drive way out there. And it was a long, long drive. And often I'd see
154 him following me in my rearview mirror. And I'd get there and run inside the gate and be
155 safe. And sometimes I would come out and the end of the day, and we were dumb, we
156 didn't lock cars back then, and he'd be sitting in my car. And so my parents helped me
157 get a restraining order, which back then, was very uncommon. And he never minded it,
158 never minded it. Well, by the end of that summer I was such a nervous wreck because I
159 was always terrified of where he would pop up and he didn't respect the restraining order
160 and I guess most abusing men don't, so um, I was just at the point of a breakdown. So my
161 parents sent me on a three week trip back to Rochester where my relatives were just to
162 get me the hell out of Phoenix, which saved my life, probably. And I stayed with relatives
163 that loved me, and I had two cousins that were born the same year as me, and we pretty
164 much drank, because we're all alcoholic, all the nine cousins except my sister who
165 escaped the disease for some reason. She does pills instead. But nevertheless, I was in a
166 different state, I was removed from him and he couldn't stalk me. The day I came back,
167 walked in my parent's house, 2 in the afternoon, the phone was ringing and it was him.
168 So somehow he knew when I got back, he was probably stalking me at the airport and I
169 didn't know it. Well, the blessing happened. He—because he came to all my classes
170 junior classes, he didn't get credit. So they gave him the boot, fellowship out the door and
171 he had to go to college in flagstaff Arizona, I don't why they took him, but he was a great
172 debater. However, as soon as I moved into my dorm that senior year, he was calling my
173 dorm room. He found me again. And occasionally, I would have to see him at debate
174 tournaments and I was terrified, I tried to quit that year. And um, my professor and my
175 advisor, my debate coach and my advisor really put pressure on me and I felt some
176 responsibility to B-, who was my debate coach for two years, to at least finish this thing.
177 So um, we had brought aboard in the debate program, a guy from Colorado who was
178 getting his Masters. And he had been a national debater, and so he was an assistant debate
179 coach. And he was just a nice, brilliant nerd, basically. And we went out to coffee about
180 five times and I could tell he liked me. And we would drink, and we had a great old time.

181 But he was just a guy who was not going to put his hands around my throat. So we went
182 out, about the sixth time at Denny's in T, AZ, he's getting out—I'm applying to graduate
183 schools because now I've figured out I want to be a speech therapist. Well, lo and behold
184 it turns out he's applying to the same graduate schools for his PhD.

185 R3: This new guy?

186 P3: Yeah, J-. And um, J- is also applying and we both get fellowships—and we both got a
187 full ride—I got a full ride, fellowship through both Purdue and USC. So did he. Funny
188 thing, I don't know how it happens, but it did. And so, we were sitting in Denny's and he
189 takes out a napkin and he's starts doing numbers and I said, what are you doing? And he
190 said, well, I've figured out that it's way cheaper to do married student housing than
191 single student housing, so why don't we get married? And that was a proposal. And I like
192 him a lot, I loved him as a brother, as a human being because I felt safe with him, he
193 didn't make sexual moves on me. He was just a gentleman. We liked the same kind of
194 music, and he was just a non-threat. And so I didn't—I was so afraid of hurting people
195 and such a people-pleaser—I'm kind of a barometer, I walk in a room and I sponge up
196 the feeling to this day, unfortunately, and I can sense who's unhappy and my role from
197 childhood is I want to help you, I want to make it better, I want to make you feel ok so I
198 can breathe. That's the part I've learned about me. If I help you, then I can take a deep
199 breath because you're ok. Part of my ism, my perceptions are wrong. So anyway, I didn't
200 tell him no and I find that by December of that year, I'm engaged to this man. And I
201 don't love him like I should love a husband. Well, my mother sees dollar signs, because
202 this man is going to accomplish great things and he is, and he did. He climbed the ladder
203 of success and he's a multi-multi-millionaire. And my mother either went for looks or
204 money. He didn't have the looks but he was going to have the money, and she knew that.
205 And I remember, in the spring of—probably February of that year, I was home and I went
206 for a walk with my mom and I said, well how do you know if you love somebody? She
207 said, well, it'll come. And then she said, at some point before I got married to him, she
208 said, I need to tell you about the wedding night. As though she didn't—well, of course, I
209 never told her what my sexual history was—she said, you just lay there and pretend you
210 enjoy it. That was my introduction. So um, anyway about a month before I was to marry

211 him, which was the final year of my student teaching and my career at ASU, a month
212 before graduation, I attempted to break up with him. I told him the truth, I said, I don't
213 love you like a woman should love a man, I want out. And so he and my mother sat me
214 down and said, you're just nervous, this is nerves, and my mother said, J-, I've sent out
215 all the invitations, what will people think? And I was so mortified, I'm so weak—and I
216 didn't know how to fight her and I didn't know how to fight him. So I married him. I
217 married him four days after I graduated from ASU because he represented a ticket out of
218 the state of Arizona. And by now he had decided not to go to the graduate school, USC,
219 that I had accepted admission to. He decided that he was going to take a job of upward
220 mobility with a very large industry, called L- Industry which then owned [company name
221 and company name], it's morphed over the years and it's a very big conglomerate. And
222 he was offered this job outside of San Francisco. And it sounded perfect. I marry this
223 man, my mother picked out my bridesmaid dresses, my flowers, set up this wedding in a
224 church I'd never attended, I was just kind of like—I was a robot going through the
225 motions. Um, got married, in a church, had the reception in the church reception hall.
226 Went on my one night honeymoon and then we drove out of the state the next morning
227 and I thought, finally I have escaped alcoholism. So we drank the whole way up the coast
228 to California, um, we ended up living in Walnut Creek which is East of Berkely and San
229 Francisco, and teaching jobs were all gone because we got married in June, and pretty
230 much good teachers had been hired and I had to get my teaching certification in
231 California—I already had it in Arizona. So I thought well, I'll do some graduate stuff. So
232 I ended up doing graduate stuff in political science at UC Berkely. And I'm getting a
233 small stipend for helping somebody in the political science department. And he's
234 working in a nearby town, and every weekend we're going to all the wineries and
235 sampling wine, and boy do they have great wineries in northern California. So what a
236 great life. And we'd bring home cases, we'd bring home cases of what we'd sampled.
237 And so my drinking really took off in earnest. And he decided that in order to be this up
238 and coming millionaire that he was going to be, I needed to be Martha Stewart. She
239 didn't exist in my mind then, but I became a gourmet cook. We would entertain people
240 and always he would claim what I did and cooked as a business write-off, because he saw

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241 people as commodities to be used. And I was trying to make friends. And I didn't really
242 get—I mean, we never talked about, did we want kids? Was god a part of our lives?
243 Nothing. Our parents voted for the same president and our mothers had attended
244 Presbyterian universities, this must mean we're a match made in heaven. So, five months
245 into the marriage, I get pregnant. Now that was not on his life plan. He didn't want
246 children, apparently ever. And I was going to get an abortion and I said, oh no, I am not
247 going to get an abortion. So, pretty much, that ended our sex life. Five months into the
248 marriage. So, we were married on June 8th, and 14 months to the day later on August 8th,
249 my son was born. And because I was having a son, because I was having a baby, that
250 meant um, that shot any upcoming teaching career, so he took a job in southern
251 California where he'd make more money. And my job back then was to manage the
252 apartment building we lived in because that reduced our rent. And I got increasingly
253 pregnant, and he traveled, usually five days of the week. Flew all over the country for this
254 company. And I was home alone in this apartment, living in a Puerto Rican
255 neighborhood. With people that didn't speak English. They were very nice, very kind
256 people. But I didn't know how to communicate. Just get their rent checks. And so, it was
257 a lonely time and you can really be anonymous. But I remember watching a program on
258 television, and I'm pregnant—and I didn't drink during that pregnancy. Because I knew
259 better, for some reason I knew better. And I was watching a program on television one
260 night in LA, and a woman was talking about alcoholism. And there was a number on the
261 screen, and I called that number. And this lady came over and talked to me. And I tucked
262 that away in my memory for future reference and then went merrily about my life. I had
263 this huge baby, he was nine pounds, that was big for me. And um, a husband that was
264 continuing to travel full time. So the baby was five months old and he accepted a job
265 back in Connecticut and I'd never lived back east. So, closed down the apartment, he
266 picked out a place to live in Manchester Connecticut because he was working in
267 Hartford. And right after Christmas we flew to Hartford Connecticut which was five
268 below zero. And I'd only lived in Western climates and it's hard to know how to drive.
269 So now I'm living in a condo, beautiful brand new condo, alone in the middle of the
270 winter with this baby. And I have a husband who doesn't want anything to do with me.

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271 Sexually. And is stopping bathing. And is looking at me like I'm an energizer bunny and,
272 if J- looks at me twice, she'll probably get pregnant, so I'll leave her alone. So I'm
273 feeling really bad about myself. But I become a gourmet cook and we entertain every
274 weekend because it's important to his career. And at all costs I have to be pleasant to him
275 and help promote him, even though that was never my dream, to be rich. So, the drinking
276 increases, I'm still not drinking alone by myself, but it's soon to come. We had a block
277 party that summer and my baby was just about to walk. We went to the block party and
278 there was this next door neighbor who looks at me like a man's supposed to look at a
279 woman. So we began this affair. And he was older than me and uh, but it was very
280 flattering. And I never thought I would have an affair. I was very guilty about it so my
281 drinking ramped up. My husband found out and that brought about the demise of my
282 marriage. And that affair just about killed me. I drank over it for a long time after I got
283 out of that marriage. Um, I was young, I had the baby, I moved back to Phoenix and—to
284 wait for my divorce to become final because—Connecticut's a catholic state, it took nine
285 months, and you had to have witnesses. And there was plenty of mental cruelty that they
286 could attest to. I mean, he could have slapped me with adultery, but he wanted rid of me
287 as much as I wanted rid of him. And before the divorce became final he contacted me and
288 he said, look, very straightforward, I went into this marriage hoping to avoid being
289 drafted to Vietnam. Would you mind staying legally married to me until the draft is over.
290 So, I pretty much felt like everything had been a fraud. And so, the divorce went through.
291 Meanwhile, my sister is about to get married, I go to Phoenix in February, my divorce is
292 final at the end of July. I go to Phoenix in July and my sister gets married the first of
293 April. And we're waiting for the wedding and I have a friend who introduces me to John,
294 who is my husband now, and we're to be godparents of her baby that's born in April. Her
295 husband had committed suicide because he was a Vietnam vet who couldn't stand the
296 aftermath. So, we're helping this widow and we are the godparents. We're introduced
297 because he lives two blocks away with his dad while he finishes grad school. He lives
298 two blocks away from my mother. So, we start getting together after putting the child
299 down at night and taking walks. Turns out, we are both believing totally in reincarnation.
300 Believing we had been married in past lives, we were soul mates. I didn't want to get

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301 married, he was never going to get married, he's older than me and was going to be a
302 confirmed bachelor. And of course, we fell in love with each other because we had so
303 much in common, don't you know, from past lives and everything. So I fall madly in love
304 with this man. He gets done with graduate school and moves to the Northwest to get a job
305 because he had always loved Washington. He ends up getting a job outside of Portland. I
306 know him less than six months. My divorce happens. Two weeks after that, me and my
307 baby fly up to Portland and I marry him. So I've ricocheted out of one marriage, into a
308 marriage now with a man that I don't really know, but just love what I think I know about
309 him. And we've been married for 43 years. I don't know how this has stayed together
310 because we didn't know each other at all. What happened was, we ended up moving up to
311 Washington at the end of our first year of marriage. And his father had a little beach
312 property in La Conner, and said we could stay there because his dad was going to go out
313 of the country while John found a job in Washington. Well, we discovered that we didn't
314 have the money, but we could make blackberry wine. And, boy, did we figure out how to
315 make blackberry wine. And it was godawful tasting, but it worked. And back then you
316 could buy gallons of wine in a liquor store called C- and it was 3 dollars a gallon. And
317 they had a white one, a red one and a pink one. And it was just like hog heaven. Between
318 our blackberry gag wine and this, we were just cruising along. And then we get pregnant.
319 And by now we were living in Whatcom County. And my second child was born, two
320 years after we were married and my oldest child is now for years old. And my oldest
321 child decides he didn't want a brother. Not ever. He wanted to be an only child and he's
322 going to try to kill this baby. And it turns out—I didn't know this, but my oldest child is
323 ADHD and he has oppositional defiant disorder. So he's born to a set of debaters, he
324 comes into the world debating, anything you say he will disagree with, to this very
325 minute. So I have no idea how to cope. And alcohol really became my friend. So I have a
326 new baby, the doctor sees that my son is out of control. We have a two bedroom house,
327 so my husband—doctor recommended that we build a six foot partition around the baby's
328 crib and his diaper change table with a lock up at the top so they could stay in the same
329 room and the baby wouldn't be killed. Because J- would come after him. Every time he
330 was out of his crib. And um, it was bad. So at this point, my parenting skills are shot and

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331 he's so mad that there's a baby in the house, he's just really acting out a lot. And he was a
332 bright little boy, so fortunately, I put him in Kindergarten when he was five because he
333 was already reading, and I had a daily reprieve from him, somewhat, so I could focus on
334 the baby. And four years later, my baby B- was born, so I had J, E and B. And B was
335 born in 1978, And by 1978 I am drinking during the day every day. I had recently found
336 out that my first husband was gay. That also added to the lack of interest in having sex
337 with a woman. And my son is ratcheting up his behavior. And one day he went to school,
338 and unbeknownst to me, my husband had a gun and he stole the gun, found bullets, took
339 it to school in fourth grade, he took my jewelry and any money we had in the house to
340 school and gave it away to make himself popular. And at the end of the day—and I was
341 drunk—the principal called and said, I need you to know what your son did today. Back
342 then they didn't sent the kid to Juvie. They sent the kid home with the revolver in a
343 brown paper bag with the bullets. And I looked at him and said, did you do this? And he
344 said, yes. And I hauled off and smacked him. And I smacked him on the face because I'm
345 not a child abuser and I don't know that you should hide bruise. So, then my husband
346 came home and got him on the backside, and he was abused. By us. And the next day he
347 went to school, and the duty on the playground said what happened to your face? And he
348 said, well, my mother horse-whipped me. Whereupon, I was turned into CPS as a child
349 abuser. And that was in 1978, and my drinking went down, and down and down. Because
350 there's few things more demoralizing than being a child abuser. And being drug through
351 the system, and the counseling, and almost signing your child over to child protective
352 services which I came close to doing, but didn't. So, I'm drinking and drinking and
353 drinking, and um, I just want to die. And I have three kids and I can't do it. And my
354 husband comes home one too many times noticing that I'm drunk. So he went to the
355 community alcohol center and got some brochures on alcoholism. And this one night on
356 April 22nd actually it was, that was my first sober day. And he sat my down and
357 unplugged the phone after the kids went to bed, and he said, J-, you're an alcoholic. And
358 it was the thing I hated most because I never thought I would be like my father. I hated
359 my father. I thought alcoholism was for weak, immoral people. And I was weak, but I
360 wasn't immoral, at least I didn't think so at the time. So he throws these brochures at me,

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361 and says here's the number to call the CAC for counseling. You either get sober, or I take
362 the kids and I leave you. And I knew he would get custody. So I'm sobbing, and all of the
363 sudden I remember the phone is unplugged. And I go in my kitchen and plug it back in
364 and the phone rings immediately. It's about 10:30 at night and it's my father calling from
365 Phoenix. And he said that his twin sister had just been found dead of alcoholism. And she
366 was in New Jersey. And her body had been alone in the apartment, unattended. And one
367 hundred empty vodka bottles had been in her apartment. So I got the gong from my
368 husband. Now I'm getting it about my aunt. And I knew that there but for the grace of
369 god, would be me. So I got on the floor in my kitchen, and I prayed to a god that I didn't
370 really know existed. And what happened to me was, all of a sudden was physically
371 wrapped in the warmest, safest—it was like a blanket came around me and I was safe.
372 And I stopped sobbing and I went to bed and I honestly slept. And the next day I didn't
373 have the compulsion to drink and I haven't ever since. So then I became insanely curious
374 about, what kind of power lifted me out of this? The very next day I made an
375 appointment to go see the counselor at the community alcohol center and I saw her for
376 six months. She sent me to 3 AA meetings. I had known a lady that went to AA, she was
377 the mother of one of my babysitters, who probably knew that I was drunk every time I
378 called for Lisa to come over. So I called this mother and I asked her, do you go to these
379 meetings? She said yes. I asked her if she'd take me to one and so the very first one was
380 in Bellingham. It was in a basement. And back then in 1979 everyone smoked in
381 meetings. I had never smoked. Meetings started at 8:30 and they went until ten at night.
382 She takes me down into this dark, smoky room and it's creepy. And there's really scary
383 looking people in there. And the woman chairing the meeting wears her glasses down
384 like this and she looks at you with laser eyes that see right through you. And I was
385 terrified. And this room has couches all the way around in and there's a great big table in
386 the middle. And people were sitting on the couches, and they were sitting at the table.
387 And I found a seat at the very back of the room and I tried to hide behind a post. And I
388 listened to people. And something happened to me in that room. I felt like, I'm scared to
389 death of these people, but at the same time I understand you. And I was terrified, but I
390 was fascinated at the same time. And um, so I chatted, chatted, chatted with J the whole

391 time she drove me home, and I asked her, can you take me to another meeting? So a
392 couple of days later she took me to a meeting up in Lynden. Which was my second
393 meeting and that also was in the basement of a church, we meet in basements for
394 whatever reason. And um, she takes me into this meeting and these men look at me and
395 say, Alanon is in the next room, cause I'm young. And I looked at them and I thought,
396 you have no idea who I am, I'm going to prove you wrong! Because that was my theory,
397 I'm going to prove you wrong! I'm a coward but I'm a feisty coward. So, that was the
398 last meeting I ever went to. She subsequently stopped going to alcoholics anonymous and
399 she got drunk. But I got sober. And so, between going to L- where I was the pretty much
400 only woman attending for most of the first twelve years of my sobriety. I kept going there
401 for—number one it was close to my house, and number two, those men were like father
402 figures that I'd never had. They were loving and kind and tolerant and they didn't judge
403 me. And through all of my insanity, they kept saying, keep coming back. I believed with
404 every fiber of my being that if you had a child like mine you would be drunk too.
405 Because by now, my child and my husband are in complete tug-of-war over me and they
406 can't stand each other. I had two alpha males in my house and they can't stand each
407 other. And the only time I felt free was when I got out of that damn house and got to a
408 meeting. And my husband didn't understand, now that I am sober, why did I have to go
409 to these meetings? I thought you only had to go to three? But I now know that I couldn't
410 go to three and stay alive, so I'm going every chance I get, which in the beginning, was
411 maybe three. So I'm going to Lynden, I'm going to Bellingham. I meet a lady that
412 becomes my sponsor and she tells me about a couple of other meetings, one of them
413 being Drydock. And I start going there and there are more women my age. And I started
414 finding friends, my age with little kids. And so I started saying, let's have lunch dates in
415 the park. And we'd bring our kids and peanut butter sandwiches and we'd spread out a
416 blanket and we'd have a meeting while they were on the swings. And that was my early
417 experience of alcoholics anonymous. And more and more women were coming in, and I
418 was feeling more and more a part of. But I never could get out after meetings with people
419 for coffee because my husband was insanely jealous and worried about me and um. I felt
420 duty-bound to get back home. And I felt duty-bound even when I'd go to Saturday noon

421 meetings, to get back home. Because he wouldn't think about making lunch for the kids,
422 ever. They'd all be starving and I'd come in and I'd feel resentful and I'd slap on lunch.
423 That way I'm pleasing them, pleasing everybody. So I get sober. And about five years
424 into sobriety my baby goes to school and I'm devastated. Because by now, I'm baking all
425 my bread from scratch, I've taught myself how to cook and can, and I can everything all
426 the way from the beginning of apricot season all the way through tomatoes. I canned all
427 summer. And stored up stuff. I was really becoming quite a good homemaker. And I was
428 sponsoring women. And when little B- went to school, I cried for about three weeks. And
429 my husband said, you've got to do something with yourself. Why don't you go back and
430 get your teaching credentials in Washington, which sounded like a good idea. But instead
431 I find myself applying to a graduate program that they have in Washington. Because by
432 now I have a real love for children. And I get accepted into this graduate program in
433 school counseling, believe it or not. So we're in this same track of classes as private
434 practitioners, but I have to take some extra education classes. And what appealed to me
435 about working in schools was, it's free, whereas in private practice you're charging
436 people. I just didn't want to do that because AA had given me my life and it was free. So
437 I get accepted into this program, and they only took six people every two years. So I get
438 into this program, I went through it, and my second year I was in an internship at
439 Bellingham high school, and at the end of that internship I was hired. So, a couple of
440 years ago I retired after 28 years of a counseling career. And um, it was a job beyond my
441 wildest dreams. It was a job I would have done for free. But my definition of a great life
442 is, you find your passion and then find a way to get paid for it. And so, my school
443 counseling career, here I am a former child abuser, working with kids. Having a heart for
444 them because I've been at the bottom, and I have a heart for kids who've been at the
445 bottom. But it's also because I just connect with kids. It's a gift that god me somehow,
446 and I have this ability to hear with my heart. And so kids are telling me what their
447 problem is, and I intuitively know—the book says I will intuitively know how to handle
448 things that used to baffle me—well, I intuitively know, I get stuff at a deep level about
449 people. Because I'm a listener. And so, my counseling career is pretty effective. And I
450 learn how not to take everything home over time. And I learn how to balance being a

Appendix C - Participant 5

451 mother, being a wife, being a sober member of alcoholics anonymous who still is
452 sponsoring a few women but I really don't have time to sponsor many. And I go through
453 different sponsors along the way. And um, at about 14 years sobriety I have a successful
454 career, I have a good marriage, and I have successful children. And I get mad at my AA
455 group in Lynden because one of my sponsees is dinkin' around with a guy in the group
456 who's married to somebody else. And I get really on my high horse and I get real
457 judgmental because they're breaking up their marriages to be together. And he's 27 years
458 older than she is, and she's a gold digger, and yada yada yada—you're not doing what
459 you're supposed to do, you're not walking your talk. So I get on my self-righteous high
460 horse and I gallop out of town. And I stayed out of meetings for a whole year. During
461 which time I become a restless, irritable and discontent person. Not fit to live with. Angry
462 at alcoholics anonymous. Angrier at being alive and watching my husband and my kids
463 go about their marry lives. And my family goes on a cruise and I see everybody drinking
464 and I'm like, oh shit. We go into a—stopping in Cozumel and I have my niece with me
465 and we go around a corner and there is my drink of choice, there is a tray of Kahlua in
466 little cups, and if I had not had my favorite niece with me I probably would have picked
467 up one of those cups of Kahlua because it looked so good and I could smell it. But I
468 didn't. So, we get home and my family does an intervention on me and they say, look, we
469 liked you way better when you were going to those meetings. Please go back. And I knew
470 they were right. So I slink back to Lynden where, I'm sure that because of my absence
471 it's shriveled up and gone down the toilet. Well, it hasn't, it's doubled in size! Lots more
472 women....I know, I'm such a big deal. And I was expecting them all to say, where've you
473 been? Well, one person did. Because I'm such a big deal in my own mind, but they did
474 quite well without me. And so I'm back. And I'm trying to balance life and all of a
475 sudden what happens is, my mother is living in Phoenix, she's now a widow. She has
476 developed Alzheimer's and it becomes rapidly apparent she can't pay bills. So I go
477 become her guardian conservator, along with taking care all of her affairs, along with still
478 having kids at home, a full time job and husband that's a workaholic. So, I'm of the
479 sandwich generation. You've got an elderly parent, then you've got the children and
480 you've got the husband. And I stayed sober, but I sometimes wonder how. I credit

481 alcoholics anonymous for letting me come to the meetings and complain. And whine.
482 And cry. And they loved me anyway. They just said, we love you and we'll be here for
483 you. And they were. So my mother, I had to move up to Bellingham. Unbeknownst to her
484 I had to move her and she stayed up here for the last six years of her life. And I put her in
485 an assisted living facility because I did know that I would die if I had to have her in my
486 house. She was such a narcissist, and so self-centered and nothing I did was ever, ever
487 enough to please her. And she exhausted me...it was like, when you're with my mother,
488 there is no oxygen left in the room to breath because she's got it all. And she was not a
489 nice Alzheimer's patient. She was mean and spiteful and she would kick and be real
490 spiteful to the other members of the community that she lived in. And eventually she
491 would forget to go down for meals, so they moved her into the Alzheimer's unit which
492 was locked. And now I have a mother who's got dentures, and um, she puts them in her
493 room every night in the sink, and there's another resident there who likes to go from
494 room to room and mix up the dentures. So now I have a mother who never wears the
495 right dentures again, nor did the rest of these people and she's wearing other people's
496 clothes because they'd all get washed and then they're in this dog pile, and it was really
497 chaotic. But I was still the only caregiver. And my little sister lives in Atlanta, doesn't
498 have a job and could have taken care of mom, but won't. So I was just the caregiver. And
499 I had promised my father before he died that I would take care of my mother and I kept
500 the promise. So anyway. I think the struggles with my mother those last years with the
501 Alzheimer's were some of the worst years of my sobriety. Because I honestly forgot to
502 breath, and I would sit up in the middle of the night and I'd be shallow breathing. And I
503 now know that I was probably pretty close to panic attacks. I didn't quite pitch into them,
504 I knew how to get out of them because I'd taught children how to breath in and out of a
505 brown paper bag to dial down their panic attacks, so I knew how to do that to myself. But
506 my mother finally died and I was with her and it was a sacred experience and I was
507 grateful to be able to do that with her. But then I grieved the real mother that I never had.
508 And I faced um, you know, you let go, you keep wishing for a better past. And then you
509 grow to the point where you see that you never got one and you never will. And so what
510 the program has taught me is how to make peace with my past. How not to shut the door

511 on it, how not to regret it. How to look at myself, as a young woman, with compassion
512 instead of hatred. The steps have come true for me. And my life has meaning because of
513 the god I found as a result of this program. Because of working the steps, and because I
514 continue—with 35 years of sobriety—to give away what was so freely given to me. And
515 so I sponsor people. I now have two of my sons are full blown alcoholic. My other son is
516 an alcoholic too, but he went to a counselor who said, you got two DWI's cause you have
517 ADHD. That was your original problem. That was just music to his little sick ears. So,
518 despite the fact that he's been in AA for a total of four years on blue slips he still doesn't
519 believe he has a problem. So that's his life. He may or may not ever get sober, it's not my
520 business. But my sponsor told me, about my other two sons, you've got to go to Alanon
521 because it's going to teach you to love your sons without it killing you. And that has been
522 absolutely true. So, the best years of my sobriety have been since I became a double
523 winner and started to both. Because AA teaches me how to be sober and stay sober, and
524 give away sobriety. Alanon teaches me how to live with you and let you be you and let
525 your life path unfold as its supposed to unfold for you, without me getting involved and
526 trying to rescue you from your path. So, in a nutshell, that is my life today. I still am
527 living a lot with not being able to breathe, because since I've retired it became—by the
528 end of the 90's it became readily apparent to me that my husband was not well because
529 he was starting to stockpile during Y2K. He was believing it would be the end of the
530 electric grid and he was doing really crazy things. So I went to my doctor who is a
531 member of AA and I described John's behavior and um, he said, J, he's manic. And I'd
532 never heard that word applied to someone I was, you know, married to. So he was
533 referred to a psychiatrist and he got on some medication in 2000, which helped a lot. But
534 the psychiatrist left town as they often do and that medication over the years has ceased
535 to be effective without more added in. So today he has a diagnosis of depression, mania,
536 level 2 depression which is not the bottom of the belly of the whale—his depression
537 comes out as irritable, restless, mean—he's got mania, full on 1, but depression bipolar 2.
538 So he's got a cocktail of medications that occasionally work and occasionally cease
539 working. So we cycle. And in his cycles things go really, really bad. So what's happened
540 with me over living with him and holding my breath and seeing the rages he can fly into,

Appendix C - Participant 5

541 he has never touched me, but I see the jaw set, the slamming of the—so I live in fear. So,
542 I have redoubled my meetings, I have redoubled my alanon meetings. I have redoubled
543 my efforts to take care of myself. Because I know my mentally ill husband will self-
544 destruct with or without me in the house. And because I love him, I hate his disease, he
545 doesn't want to be sick. He doesn't have control a lot of the time over horrible thoughts
546 he is thinking like OCD perseveration which I think he also has. So I live with mental
547 illness. It's not my choice. A lot of my sponsees say, why don't you divorce him. Well,
548 he's 77 year old, he's a lot older than me. He is a man of dignity. He is a good human
549 being who loves me the best he can. And I'm not going to throw him away. I can't. So
550 it's my choice to live there with him and when he's riding the crazy train, which he is
551 today, I look at him and I say honey, you're on the crazy train and I'm not riding it ever
552 again with you. So I'm going to leave and I'm going to take care of myself. And I think
553 you know what you need to do, which is take your meds, eat, and go and exercise and get
554 out of your head. I hope you'll do those things. But I'm not in control of whether he
555 chooses to do those things or not. So what I do is I have escape plans. I have places that I
556 visit and I can stay at any hour, because I have to take care of myself and my sobriety is
557 coming first. So that's pretty much it.

558 R3: You talked about wanting to make friends and trying to connect with people, and
559 connecting with other mothers and it sounds like that was really pivotal.

560 P3: Well, right now the best friends I have in the world are in alcoholics anonymous. And
561 they are the last things I was looking for. I came in here, I didn't know you would find
562 real fellowship of the heart. I wouldn't ever have dreamed that the people that know me
563 best and love me best are in these rooms.

564 R4: And you weren't even looking for that.

565 P4: I didn't know to look for that, I didn't expect lifelong friends. People I trust with my
566 life and they can trust their life with me, and what they say doesn't leave me.

567